

THE UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO

FOUR FALLACIES:

THUCYDIDES ON THE CHALLENGES OF DEMOCRATIC DECISION-MAKING

A DISSERTATION SUBMITTED TO

THE FACULTY OF THE DIVISION OF THE SOCIAL SCIENCES

IN CANDIDACY FOR THE DEGREE OF

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

JOHN U. NEF COMMITTEE ON SOCIAL THOUGHT

BY

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CHICAGO, ILLINOIS

JUNE 2022

To Rosaria

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Acknowledgments

This dissertation is the result of years of talking and reading with others in the unique community of friends and scholars at The Committee on Social Thought. I would like to acknowledge the department and of the Division of the Social Sciences for supporting this research. I would also like to thank my committee. I owe thanks to my committee chair, Nathan Tarcov, for his careful reading and his perspicacious feedback at every stage; Arlene Saxonhouse, for her generosity in joining my committee from afar and her many scholarly contributions that influenced every aspect of this dissertation; and Matthew Landauer, whose teaching and enthusiasm for the study of Athenian democracy sparked and guided this project from its earliest stages. I would also like to thank James Redfield and Helma Dik for many delightful hours talking and reading through Thucydides.

Special thanks are due to friends and colleagues: Paul Cato, Danielle Charette, Luke Foster, Sam Lee, Mat Messerschmidt, David Molina, Antoine Pageau-St. Hilaire, Andrea Ray, Konrad Weeda, and David Williams all contributed to an enriching time here. Emma Lunbeck especially helped me think through some core ideas during our Fundamentals reading group. Phil Dershwitz's humor and insight on all things feline and political reminded me of the important things. I would also like to acknowledge the ultimate Hyde Parkers Lizzie Cooke and Michael Johnson for their support and friendship. 2:00 p.m. espresso and Friday movie night made all the difference.

My family deserve a big thank you for their patience during the disappearing act that is writing a dissertation. My mother and father have only themselves to blame, though, since they put me on the path to Social Thought since just about day one. My sisters, Katie, Eliza, and

Gracie, have commiserated ever since we all read through the gripping daily routines of Cornelia and Dicaeopolis. Special thanks also to my lovely family in-law, Joie, Pam, Grandma Dot, Joe, Marie-Laure, and Lorenzo, for their kind support.

Finally, I owe more than I can express to my wife, Rosaria, who has been my best friend and fellow traveler ever since we took ancient political theory together in college. Over many conversations and drafts, she helped give shape to my thoughts and signposts to my paragraphs. More importantly, she helped me to set aside work and make time for friends, the outdoors, and new adventures. I look forward to the memories we'll make next.

Introduction

Thucydides' account of the Peloponnesian War can seem like a Rorschach test for the scholars who interpret it. Some read him as a cold-hearted realist and the first scientific historian and others as a moral dramatist aghast at the conduct of the Athenian empire; some read him as a confident proponent of the powers of human reason and others as a fatalist in the face of the power of chance. One of the few things that most readings of Thucydides have agreed upon, however, is that he views democracy as a foolish form of government. Thomas Hobbes wrote that Thucydides "least of all liked the democracy," and few scholars have challenged this reading.¹ To the extent that Thucydides had good feelings for the democratic form of government, according to such readings, it was only insofar as it ceased to function like a democracy and made way for the rule of an exceptional ruler—Pericles.²

This dissertation seeks to recover a reading of Thucydides more productive for democratic theory. This begins with finding a critique of Pericles' leadership. Reading Thucydides as a hagiographer of Pericles neglects the narrative force of the work as a whole, as well as the direct authorial statements of Thucydides at various moments throughout his work—comments that suggest his perspective differs from Pericles'. Based on his speeches, we can be

¹ Thomas Hobbes, "Of the Life and History of Thucydides," in *The Peloponnesian War: The Complete Hobbes Translation*, ed. David Grene (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1989), 572.

² See Cynthia Farrar, *The Origins of Democratic Thinking* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 158-165; Harvey Yunis, *Taming Democracy: Models of Political Rhetoric in Classical Athens* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1996), 33. T.J. Perry, "Pericles as a 'Man of Athens': Democratic Theory and Advantage in Thucydides," *History of Political Thought* 39, no. 2 (Summer 2018): 235-267.

certain that Pericles believed himself to be a great leader whose presence improved the political life of Athens. But given the disastrous consequences of Pericles' push for war, our starting assumption should not be that Thucydides is presenting Pericles' point of view as his own. We should assume that every speech tells us a great deal about the deliberative context of a decision, and about the speaker's sense of what might appeal to the people listening, but we should also assume that the rhetorical necessities of the moment separate these speakers' speeches from Thucydides' own views. Just as we should avoid equating any speaker in Plato's dialogues with Plato's own views, no individual speaker can be taken to speak for Thucydides.

By way of a critique of Pericles, I hope to shift the focus towards the assembled people as the source of good or bad decision-making. By looking to speeches and descriptions of Assembly behavior I will consider how the assembled people approach problems. I take it that Thucydides includes so many scenes of deliberation and so many detailed speeches in order to give the reader insight into the decision-making of Athenian democracy. When a speaker makes a particular claim about democracy or empire to an Athenian audience, we should not assume that Thucydides shares this view, but we can assume it is the kind of message that would have plausibly appealed to the Athenian people. What a speaker chooses to say tells us about the dispositions and commitments of the audience at hand. Thucydides famously does not commit to literal accuracy in his reconstruction of the speeches in his work, but instead aims to recreate "the overall sense what was most required" of a speaker, given the context (I.22.1).³ In other words, he draws out what he takes to have been most indicative of the factors that influenced the

³ Translations are my own unless otherwise noted, working from the Oxford Classical Text edition: *Thucydidis Historiae*, ed. Henry Stuart Jones and John Enoch Powell (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1942).

deliberation of the audience. The text may not capture much of what speeches actually sounded like in the Assembly (and given the obscurity of Thucydides' prose, it is unlikely that they are at all literal).⁴ But the editorial nature of Thucydides' presentation of the speeches makes them all the more central to an analysis of the text's broader purpose.⁵

What makes the Athenian democracy's decision-making distinctive? From its beginning, the narrative impresses upon the reader that decisions at Athens are not being reached as they should. In order to assess the quality of the Athenians' decisions, we need to understand their way of thinking—what Marc Cogan calls their “habit[s] of thought” including their “extrarational particularities.”⁶ Thucydides engineers an experience for the reader that almost entirely obscures the backstage politicking of how decisions were arrived at, as well as the myriad and intricate institutions of Athenian government, in favor of the most public and democratic gatherings—the meetings of the Assembly. The Athenian public is dramatically centered in the scenes, and public decision-making emerges as a result of various speakers' ability to persuade the gathered public. Thucydides' text invites us to consider the causes and conduct of the war as the result of people's perceptions and modes of deliberating, including how they understand themselves as decision-makers. This is why prominent debates in the work, such as the Mytilene Debate, address the subject of debate itself. It also helps us to understand the broader usefulness of the work—why it is that Thucydides considers it to be a “possession for all

⁴ Dionysius of Halicarnassus complained that there were few even by his own time during the reign of Augustus Caesar who could parse the convoluted language. “On Thucydides,” trans. W. Kendrick Pritchett (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1975), 410.

⁵ Jacqueline de. Romilly, *The Mind of Thucydides*, ed. Hunter R. Rawlings III and Jeffrey Rusten, trans. Elizabeth Trapnell Rawlings (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2012), 15.

⁶ Marc Cogan, *The Human Thing: The Speeches and Principles of Thucydides' History* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1981), 208, 201.

time” (I.22.4). The quality of decision-making will always rest on the perspective and self-understanding of the decision-maker.

The central episode of Athenian decision-making is the Sicilian Expedition, the dramatic core of the work. It seems intended to open up the question for the reader of how such a catastrophe happened, defining our perspective on what precedes and follows it. The description of the disaster is inflected with tragic overtones—but it would be a mistake to read the work as a tragedy in the sense that *Oedipus Tyrannus* is, where the crucial decisions are not avoidable and human agency is powerless in the face of the external forces that drive events.⁷ While Sophocles begins his tragedy with Oedipus already entrapped by his actions, Thucydides shows us that the Athenians are not inevitably bound for disaster at Sicily—they freely make decisions that make a difference. The pathos of Thucydides’ narrative draws its power from the possibility that disaster could have been avoided. While many scholars have read Thucydides as a fatalist showing how events defy human understanding or control, and therefore as a pessimist on the possibility of wise political decision-making, I seek to show that Thucydides dwells on particular errors precisely because they are understandable and avoidable.⁸

By treating the Athenians’ decision-making as flawed but understandable, this reading seeks to better understand Thucydides’ perspective on how poor decisions are arrived at. Instead of reading Thucydides’ narrative as a moral decline from the heights of the funeral oration to the

⁷ Hans-Peter Stahl has developed such a reading, which traces its origins to the work of Francis Cornford. Hans-Peter Stahl, *Thucydides: Man’s Place in History*, trans. David Seward (Swansea: Classical Press of Wales, 2003 [1966]). Francis Cornford, *Thucydides Mythistoricus* (London: Routledge & Kegan, 1907).

⁸ On Thucydides as fatalist, see Stahl, “Herodotus and Thucydides on Blind Decisions Preceding Military Action,” in *Thucydides and Herodotus*, ed. Edith Foster and Donald Lateiner (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012).

Melian Dialogue,⁹ this project considers it instead as a gradual unfolding of the implications, consequences, and limitations of Pericles' rhetoric and leadership.¹⁰ Scholars who equate good Athenian politics with Pericles' leadership tend to read the Sicilian expedition as a sharp break from Athenian strategic thinking under Pericles, and use it to draw a contrast between Pericles' wisdom and the Athenian people's foolishness.¹¹ However, the Athenians' ambition in Sicily and penchant for foreign adventures is present from the very beginning of the work and in the Athenians' calculations at the initiation of the war. The Athenians' self-confidence and lack of restraint in the pursuit of empire define both Pericles' vision and the vision of the Athenians at Melos after he is gone.¹² If we understand that there is a continuity linking the Periclean and post-Periclean eras, we can develop a cohesive understanding of characteristically Athenian modes of thought throughout the war.

Four Fallacies in Athenian Deliberation

This dissertation draws out four distinct fallacies in the thought and speech of Athenian decision-making. It is often assumed that Thucydides wishes to instruct by pointing to universal motivations, as if different peoples and countries were interchangeable and unidirectional rational actors. But I wish to highlight more than just what the Athenians know, or how their

⁹ John H. Finley, Jr., *Thucydides* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1963), 128. Hugh Lloyd-Jones, *The Justice of Zeus* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983). Paul A. Rahe, "Thucydides' Critique of Realpolitik," *Security Studies* 5, no. 2 (Winter 1995): 105-141.

¹⁰ As Connor puts it: "The text leads the reader back to events and individuals, not away toward abstractions or dogmas. It respects rather than reduces the complexity of events and invites rather than dictates the reader's reaction. It is, in other words, simultaneously thoroughly artistic and thoroughly historical." W.R. Connor, *Thucydides* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984), 236.

¹¹ Finley, *Thucydides*, 202-3.

¹² Hans-Peter Stahl, *Thucydides*, 50-51.

institutions impede or distribute knowledge, but how they think about problems. The central opposition of the account is the radically distinct cultural clash of Athens with Sparta, two communities whose actions throughout the war cannot be accounted for without looking to their distinctive ways of thinking about themselves and others. This is not to deny that Thucydides holds that the lessons of reading his work have universal value—simply that we benefit from considering how different actors are susceptible to different fallacies. By dwelling on the fallacious patterns of thought that lead the Athenians astray, Thucydides evinces a belief that awareness of such fallacies may help readers avoid them and the disasters they invite.

The Athenians' four fallacies are addressed in the four chapters that follow, outlined below.

Fallacy 1: Rule Through Trust

In the first chapter, I look to the leadership of Pericles to identify a fallacy implicit in democratic practice under Pericles: that trust in the rule of a statesman is an adequate form of democratic self-rule. The Athenians follow Pericles because of his personal prestige and obvious integrity, and entrust him with a level of authority bordering on monarchical. He does not so much advise the *demos* as rule over them. In the subsequent narrative, after Pericles has died, we see that the people seem ill-prepared to cope with his absence. His towering presence seems to have distorted the deliberative basis of democratic self-rule, and in particular we see that his rule by prestige leaves a legacy of personality politics that paves the way for the demagogue Cleon. The famous echoes of Pericles' rhetoric in Cleon's demagoguery show us the dangerous afterlife of Pericles' way of speaking and his style of rule. In keeping with Socrates' argument in Plato's *Gorgias*, this chapter holds that we can reasonably assign responsibility to Pericles for the language and

conduct of politics after his death, and that even the most well-intentioned leaders need to be evaluated according to the consequences of their words and deeds beyond their lifetimes. More specifically to the concerns of democracy, demagoguery can thrive in the aftermath of—and as a consequence of—even the most admirable leaders.

For contemporary democratic theory, this finding encourages a broader understanding of the origins of populism and demagoguery as drawing on the successes of leaders who may appear to have little in common with such distasteful politics. It also encourages a revised understanding of Athenian politics and Thucydides' understanding of the role of leadership in a democracy. Pericles' domineering style of politics is essentially unresponsive to the will of the people—and in fact thrives on cultivating an image of opposition to them. He sees his role as a liberated trustee, with no responsibility to heed the people's wishes. By cultivating such an image of defiance, Pericles thereby makes the implicit claim that the people deserve to be defied. This is a claim that is not conducive to the kind of responsible group deliberation that democratic government demanded in the ancient polis. When the Athenians later behave with seeming immaturity in their public deliberations, we must ask ourselves how seriously they can be expected to take themselves and their self-rule, given that Pericles' powerful claim to rule implies that they are not to be taken seriously.

Chapter 2: Reason Conquers All

In the second chapter, I consider the fallacy that human reason is sufficient to overcome chance in war and build perfect social cohesion at home. Looking again to Pericles, we find that his rhetoric praising Athenian judgment and minimizing the importance of luck help us to understand subsequent Athenian rhetoric and actions. Pericles encourages the Athenians to

consider themselves to be the most rational and intelligent, and to apply their superior powers of reasoning to all areas of their lives. The Athenian rhetoric at Melos demonstrates a consequence of this thinking: because they believe that they are more rational than the Melians, they do not take seriously the Melians' different perspective on justice, trust in the gods, or hopefulness for salvation. The failure to persuade the Melians speaks to a broader problem for the Athenian empire, which is their failure to make a persuasive case for it. Their faith in their rationality—and in the universal logic of their rule—makes them incapable of speaking to other Greek cities in persuasive language. It also influences their confidence of success in war. Their decision to commit a huge amount of resources to the Sicilian Expedition should be understood as an attempt to guarantee success through planning. Without a belief that success could be guaranteed, they may have avoided such a disastrous commitment of resources.

For Pericles, Athenian superiority consists in their unrestrained pursuit of rational self-interest, a pursuit that accounts both for their imperial success and their exceptional domestic life. They are good citizens because it makes sense to be a good citizen if you live in Athens—rational self-interest and social behavior are perfectly aligned. The problem with this attitude is revealed in the description of the plague, where we see the Athenians pursuing their self-interest in radically anti-social ways. In contrast with Pericles' assumption that reliance on reason tends towards the perfection of human society, the plague narrative shows that the rational pursuit of self-interest can often lead to the most destructive behavior. The Athenians may have been better off, both in international diplomacy and in domestic behavior, if they were less confidently rationalist. Thucydides criticizes the hubristic notion that human judgment can overcome all contingencies, and to demonstrate the wisdom of circumspection. A truly rational perspective starts from acknowledging the limitations of what can be known or controlled.

Chapter 3: Character as Destiny

The third fallacy that we find in the Athenians' thinking is the idea that a people must act in accordance with their established character. That is to say, that one's course of action is determined by one's established way of doing things. We see in various speakers throughout Thucydides' account appeals to past behavior as justification for future actions, often with disastrous results. Alcibiades manipulates this kind of thinking in his advocacy of the Sicilian Expedition: In his telling, the Athenians should act decisively and expand their empire because that is who they are and always have been. In this claim, he ominously echoes Herodotus' Xerxes, who looks to the example of previous Persians to justify his doomed invasion of Greece. Here and elsewhere, Thucydides shows that when citizens cherry-pick past events to best suit their current priorities, they can be entrapped by circular thinking: they act in a way that suits their understanding of the past, while their understanding of the past is shaped by their present concerns. The urge to conform to established character can be dangerous and counter-productive in the context of collective decision-making.

Thucydides indicates that this problem can be avoided not so much by improving popular knowledge of historical events, as by a proper commitment to the benefits of change. The most effective and enlightened speakers in Thucydides' narrative do not advocate imitation of the past, but instead find ways of innovating a new course in response to changed circumstances. An effective speaker in a democratic setting needs to be able to appeal to a collective narrative that incorporates past, present, and future, and show how the decision before them fits into it coherently. At the same time, the temptation of narrative reasoning—to reduce decisions to

whatever resembles the past—must be avoided. Good decision-making requires a willingness to break from past patterns.

Chapter 4: Partisanship Over Patriotism

The final fallacy we explore is the idea that partisanship should take precedence over patriotism. This is a problem that manifests increasingly in the language of public disagreement that Thucydides' depicts over the course of the war. Democrats and oligarchs alike are inclined towards totalizing rhetoric about the nature of government, particularly about the status of the *demos*. When considering problems that affect the survival of the city against foreign threats, there is an ever-present temptation to shift the debate to questions of the nature of the regime and opponents' place within the regime. Demagogues may oppose good policy by labeling it anti-democratic; conversely, elite leaders use theoretical language to justify anti-democratic positions and disguise their own selfish motivations.

Of the four fallacies under consideration, this one is most successfully avoided by the Athenians. In the final book of Thucydides, we see the rebellious army at Samos and the oligarchs at Athens deploying increasingly partisan language as they come close to civil war. Yet the Athenians avoid the horrors of all-out civil war because the people are willing to do what the oligarchs are not: they set aside all partisan language of the regime and adopt a form of government that does not have a clear theory. It is an ambiguous regime built on a sort of truce between oligarchic and democratic factions. Despite having the upper hand in the civil turmoil, the *demos* exercises exceptional restraint in including the elites in their government. The admirably restrained behavior of the *demos* derives from their exceptional resilience and patriotism—even after suffering a defeat that would have laid low most cities, and the resulting

loss of much of their empire, they are able to carry on and recommit to the war effort. The people are willing to accept the elites into government because they understand that the alternative would be a civil war that would destroy Athens; because they have a tradition of constitutional ambiguity dating back to Pericles to support constitutional compromise; and because they have relatively modest expectations of government.

Thucydides' famous praise for the regime of the Five Thousand emerges from this analysis as praise of the Athenian people's restrained behavior, and an indication of the benefits of avoiding strong constitutional language in deliberative contexts, as constitutional language tends to serve partisan ends to the detriment of the city. The Athenians of the final book of Thucydides are both the most praiseworthy in their admirable behavior and the furthest from Pericles' vision of a unified and imperial city, as they accept political compromise, set aside democratic language, and look only to self-defense.

Scholarship on Thucydides

My approach to reading Thucydides benefits from a number of advances in scholarship ranging across decades. In the mid-20th century, David Grene and Leo Strauss were influential in reading Thucydides' text as philosophically serious and artfully constructed to bring out resonant themes, particularly those suggesting the limitations of Pericles' leadership.¹³ A generation later, W.R. Connor established that Thucydides should be read with a special focus on the power of irony and tension in the work, to show how the meaning of events and the readers' understanding of

¹³ David Grene, *Greek Political Theory: The Image of Man in Thucydides and Plato* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1950). Leo Strauss, *The City and Man* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1964).

them changes over the course of reading the work.¹⁴ Scholars including Tim Rood extended the interpretations of Thucydides' text as a narrative experience.¹⁵ Exploring the meaning of passages in light of evidence that comes to light elsewhere in the narrative, and assuming a basic coherence in the work, is now standard in the scholarship on Thucydides.¹⁶

This investigation avoids speculating about the timeline of composition of Thucydides' text, and does not base any arguments on claims that certain sections must be more or less developed than others.¹⁷ At the same time, it is not clear what the final shape of the work was intended to be.¹⁸ My position is that since all scholars agree on the central importance of the Sicilian catastrophe and its causes, taking a position on composition is not necessary.

This project seeks to build on more recent contributions that read Thucydides as a constructive resource for democracy. In contrast with the long tradition of identifying Thucydides with Pericles, some scholars find a critique of Pericles and the Athenian perspective that he represents. Most of these works focus on the immorality of Athenian empire and the excesses that Pericles seems to invite.¹⁹ But Arlene Saxonhouse and Gerald Mara have both

¹⁴ Connor, *Thucydides*.

¹⁵ Tim Rood, *Thucydides: Narrative and Explanation* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1998).

¹⁶ See especially Connor's summary of the development of such readings: "A Post-Modernist Thucydides?" in *Thucydides*, ed. Jeffrey S. Rusten (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009).

¹⁷ This method is employed for example by Paul A. Rahe, *Sparta's Second Attic War: The Grand Strategy of Classical Sparta, 446-418 B.C.* (New Haven: Yale, 2020), 172, 237.

¹⁸ Investigations such as that by Rawlings, positing that ten books were intended and that the work is built around contrasts between paired books may be correct, but cannot support any strong conclusions about the intended meaning of the work. Hunter R. Rawlings III, *The Structure of Thucydides' History* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1981).

¹⁹ Edith Foster, *Thucydides, Pericles, and Periclean Imperialism* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010). Loren J. Samons II, "Pericles and Athens," in *The Cambridge Companion to the Age of Pericles*, ed. Loren J Samons II (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007). Hermann Strasburger, "Thucydides and the Self-Portrait of the Athenians," in *Thucydides*, ed. Jeffrey S. Rusten (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009).

suggested that Thucydides shows the benefits of pluralism and the variability of democratic thought, in contrast with the unidirectional and unified aspirations of Pericles' vision of Athens.²⁰ The emphasis on the importance of multiplicity and the democratic strength of adaptability and resilience during the war are themes that call for further exploration, as does this method of reading Thucydides with a focus on deliberative fallacies.

In focusing on language, this analysis draws inspiration from the works of James Boyd White and J. Peter Euben, who emphasize that the language of the speeches reflects the self-understanding of each city, and that the Athenian failure was in part a failure to make a case for their empire that appealed to the self-understanding of other cities.²¹ This is not to reduce Thucydides to a sort of linguistic constructivist, as some do.²² Nor does this investigation share White's and Euben's conclusion that the story Thucydides tells is one of a descent into incoherence over the course of the war. Instead, I take much of the story to comment on the words and deeds of Pericles, whose foresight was not enough to counterbalance the deleterious effects of his influence, and whose politics the Athenians begin to reject by the end of Thucydides' narrative.

Thucydides in the Fifth Century and Today

²⁰ Gerald Mara, "Thucydides and Political Thought," in *The Cambridge Companion to Ancient Greek Political Thought*, ed. Stephen G. Salkever (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009). Arlene W. Saxonhouse, *Athenian Democracy: Modern Mythmakers and Ancient Theorists* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1996).

²¹ James Boyd White, *When Words Lose Their Meaning: Constitutions and Reconstructions of Language, Character, and Community* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1984). J. Peter Euben, *The Tragedy of Political Theory* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990).

²² Richard Ned Lebow, "Thucydides the Constructivist," *The American Political Science Review* 95, no. 3 (2001): 547-560.

The above conclusions do not reclaim Thucydides as a partisan of democracy (or as a partisan of any other form of government, for that matter). It can be tempting to read a series of errors as evidence of the impossibility of achieving good governance under a democracy, but we must keep in mind that this is an account of a disaster. The scope of what can be said is in some sense limited to a negative kind of usefulness, because the event that is being described is itself such a negative example. To describe one particular sequence of events is not to prescribe a universal rule to them, or to predict that a different democracy would have made the same errors that Athens did.

By the same token, it would be a mistake to look to Thucydides for simply positive models on which to build democratic politics. While Pericles may at first glance look like a model of democratic leadership, taking such a view results in a less productive and darker understanding of Thucydides' text. If Pericles is a model leader and despite his presence democracy is a disaster, then there is little of use to be found. But if we can identify the faults in both Pericles' leadership and in the Athenian people's approach to their most important decisions, then we can recover a more constructive series of critiques than a condemnation of the people as irrational.

Similarly, dismissing the people as simply "irrational" is I think anachronistic. In Greek there is not word that captures the breadth of our "emotions," nor do they speak of the "irrational" as we do.²³ Such language presumes that anything that falls outside the domain of reason can be grouped together under the label of irrational. But for the Greeks it may be more accurate to say that they took the opposite approach—reason was the exception, not the rule.

²³ See for example E.R. Dodds, *The Greeks and the Irrational* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1951).

And because reason—*logos*—also means speech, it is thematically contrasted by Thucydides and others not with emotion, but with *ergon*—fact, or reality. The way things are is not captured through reason.²⁴ There are particular and non-rational explanations for things that we can seek to comprehend. We should not dismiss them as irrational or seek to subdue them through reason. Moments of decision-making in Thucydides are a meeting of *logos* and *ergon*, when words influence events, even as the content of language has been determined by earlier events. Useful political knowledge is something acquired through the study of events rather than theoretical exploration.²⁵ By looking into errors as moments of (fallacious) reasoning, rather than simply the results of irrationality, we can gain productive insights into how these errors come to be.

I will occasionally refer to events and works not directly referenced by Thucydides. No doubt many resonances and allusions that would have carried weight for the readership of his time are lost to us. But we can still make connections to other works that survive from the 5th century, and in particular to historical events that these other works recount. Thus in chapters three and four we will use Herodotus to draw out certain resonances from the Persian Wars. The parallels between the Athenian empire's aggression and the Persians' strengthens our sense of the ill-fated nature of the Athenians' decisions, and casts different light on the broader tensions that Thucydides finds between democracy and empire, and his doubts about the empire's justification and its long-term feasibility. The Athenian democracy may have been poorly suited to run an empire, as they are told by more than one speaker, but this may redound to their credit. If there is a tension between democracy and empire, we should be open to the possibility that

²⁴ Henry H. Immerwahr, "History as Monument in Herodotus and Thucydides," *The American Journal of Philology* 81, no. 3 (July 1960): 261-290. Adam Parry, *Logos and Ergon in Thucydides* (New York: Arno Press, 1981).

²⁵ Euben, *The Tragedy of Political Theory*, 201.

Thucydides, drawing on Herodotus, held Athenian democracy to be the more choiceworthy enterprise.

It is important that, unlike Herodotus, Thucydides' work is not told through the lives of individuals. For Herodotus, the life of and death of individual actors are generally remarked upon and given a tidy meaning. History takes on a comprehensible shape through lives and deaths. Individual actors may not understand their lives in real time, but the historian and his readers can confidently make such judgments after their deaths. For Thucydides, by contrast, to the extent that his work is intended to be useful for readers, it is not by providing meaningful biographies. His work certainly does not seem intended to inspire imitation of exemplary figures, which Plutarch takes to be the chief benefit of studying men like Pericles—Thucydides does not even pause to note in his work the moment when Pericles dies.²⁶ While individuals can make a difference, Thucydides' history is told through significant moments—victories, defeats, decisions for war or peace. Individuals appear during these moments and fade out of view after making their contribution. Thucydides' approach to history seems intended to encourage humility: The course of a great conflict does not track the life of any individual. Meaning is not measured in human lifespans.

At the same time, the role of the individual is critical to understanding Thucydides' thought. His study of war cannot be abstracted from an understanding of the particular characters of the combatants and the particular ways in which leaders and peoples arrive at decisions.²⁷ Thucydides does not so much provide a theory of international relations as demonstrate the

²⁶ Plutarch, "Pericles," in *Plutarch's Lives*, ed. Arthur Hough Clough, trans. John Dryden (New York: Modern Library, 1992), 202.

²⁷ S.N. Jaffe, *Thucydides on the Outbreak of War: Character and Contest* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017).

difficulty of extracting a theoretical framework—which necessarily treats state-actors as interchangeable—from the study of historical events.

To the extent that we can draw general lessons from Thucydides, it should be in much the same way that we draw lessons from literature.²⁸ We do not read *Hamlet* for straightforward prescriptive advice, but few would deny that there is nonetheless value to be found therein. Aristotle distinguishes between poetry and history as dealing with the universal and the particular, respectively, but Thucydides' work cuts across such a distinction. He offers a story of universal value by way of a history of particular characters.²⁹ It is thus only by thinking through the Athenians' idiosyncrasies that we can appreciate the enduring value of the work.

²⁸ Kurt A. Raaflaub, "Ktēma es aiei: Thucydides' Concept of 'Learning through History' and Its Realization in His Work," in *Thucydides Between History and Literature*, ed. Antonis Tsakmakis and Mélina Tamiolaki (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2013).

²⁹ Mary P. Nichols, *Thucydides and the Pursuit of Freedom* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2015), 14.

Chapter 1 The First Fallacy: Rule through Trust

Introduction

Pericles has long been a divisive figure among scholars of Thucydides, especially for those attempting to pinpoint his views on democracy. Some scholars read Thucydides as a kind of elitist democrat, finding a clear endorsement of Pericles' strong leadership and an affinity for the vision of Athens celebrated in the funeral oration. In this view, democracy has great potential if it is only properly controlled by wise leaders like Pericles.¹ Another approach reads Thucydides as a critic of Pericles on the basis of his authoritarian style and his amoral and materialistic pursuit of empire. These readings tend to downplay Thucydides' clearly stated praise of Pericles' leadership, even as they correctly note Thucydides' reservations about Pericles' unrestrained

¹ Harvey Yunis, *Taming Democracy: Models of Political Rhetoric in Classical Athens* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1996), 33. Cynthia Farrar, *The Origins of Democratic Thinking* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 92, 155-165. J. Peter Euben, *The Tragedy of Political Theory* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990), 191-3. Jacqueline de Romilly, *Thucydides and Athenian Imperialism*, trans. Philip Thody (Oxford: The Alden Press, 1963). Antonis Tsakmakis, "Leaders, Crowds, and the Power of the Image: Political Communication in Thucydides," in *Brill's Companion to Thucydides*, ed. Antonis Tsakmakis and Antonios Rengakos (Leiden: Brill, 2006). Eirene Visvardi, *Emotion in Action: Thucydides and the Tragic Chorus* (Boston: Brill: 2015). J. Peter Euben takes this line of argumentation even further and argues that Thucydides identifies with Pericles, and that the history "extends and elaborates Periclean foresight and that his theory embodies the virtues of Periclean leadership." *The Tragedy of Political Theory* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990), 191-3. Cf. Steven Forde: "Athens always needs such a figure, one whose leadership is so strong as practically to usurp the authority of the democracy, in order to function successfully." *The Ambition to Rule: Alcibiades and the Politics of Imperialism in Athens* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1989), 159. Cf. Ryan Balot, who states that "Athens could succeed, in Thucydides' view, only as a sort of monarchy in disguise." *Greek Political Thought* (Malden: Blackwell, 2006), 131.

pursuit of empire.² This chapter takes a distinct approach by acknowledging that Thucydides clearly prefers Pericles to those leaders who followed him, but nonetheless finds a critique of Pericles' leadership as setting the stage for and thus contributing to the demagogic politics that follows. The rhetorical similarities between Pericles and the archetypical demagogue Cleon indicate a substantive connection between the two, rather than a superficial or ironic similarity serving to highlight differences between the two thinkers, as they are usually read.³ Pericles bears responsibility for the demagogic deterioration of democratic deliberation at Athens that follows his death. Thucydides does not seek to provide an ideal version of democracy through the example of Pericles, so much as to show how an exceptionally capable leader can distort and undermine democratic rule over time.

Thucydides expresses no endorsement or condemnation of a form of government as such. It is possible that he thought that democracy was not a particularly workable form of government, but it is also possible that he thought other forms were even less workable. What I hope to show is merely that he gives us the evidence to conclude that Periclean democracy is not the solution to democracy's distinctive pathologies, and that such extraordinary leaders can

² Gerald Mara, "Thucydides and the Problem of Citizenship," in *A Handbook to the Reception of Thucydides*, ed. Christine Lee and Neville Morley (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2015); S. Sara Monoson and Michael Loriaux, "The Illusion of Power and the Disruption of Social Norms: Thucydides' Critique of Periclean Policy," *American Political Science Review* 92, no. 2 (June 1998): 285-297. Edith Foster, *Thucydides, Pericles, and Periclean Imperialism* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010).

³ Gregory Crane, *The Blinded Eye: Thucydides and the New Written Word* (Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield: 1996), 232; Euben, *Tragedy of Political Theory*, 179; Romilly, *Imperialism*, 171. Hugh Lloyd-Jones, *The Justice of Zeus* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983), 139. Victoria Wohl, *Love Among the Ruins: The Erotics of Democracy in Classical Athens* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002), 100. Tim Rood takes Cleon's "specific echoes" of Pericles to suggest the lesser man's mimicking of the greater." *Thucydides: Narrative and Explanation* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1998), 148.

weaken democratic norms and institutions in such a way that they are vulnerable to demagogic manipulation. To the extent that we can find a constructive democratic theory in Thucydides, then, it is not in the domination by elite leadership, but in the capacity of the people to resist domination by any particular leader and exercise their judgment in effecting policy.⁴

Pericles' link to Athenian demagoguery has two dimensions. The first is his celebration of values that undermine careful and reasoned deliberation, especially reconsideration of decisions already made. These values are distilled by the demagogue Cleon, who adopts the Periclean posture of personal constancy while denigrating the popular tendency towards reconsideration as mere fickleness. The second dimension, which has thus far been comparatively neglected by readers of Thucydides, is Pericles' mode of managing the Assembly. Despite his good intentions and his refusal to pander to the crowd, Pericles conditions the Assembly to exercise their judgment in an immature manner. He does this by usurping the proper role of the people as rulers and substituting his own judgment for the people's.

In the aftermath of Pericles' rule, we see that Periclean rhetoric lives on and undermines productive debate, as a demagogue deploys Periclean rhetoric to circumvent substantive discussion and the reputation of leaders becomes more important than the quality of their policies. My claim, then, is not simply that Pericles fails to improve the people, but that his oft-celebrated ability to restrain them contributes to the people's immaturity and thereby undermines

⁴ In this reading I take the opposite approach from the recent work of Tomer Perry, who reads Thucydides as an anti-democrat who admires Pericles leadership precisely because it is undemocratic, but finds in the text a workable theory of elitist democracy despite Thucydides' mischaracterization of Pericles' rule as a democracy in name only. I think Thucydides' admiration of Pericles' is over-emphasized, and the assertion that he "rejected democracy" is unfounded. T. J. Perry, "Pericles as a 'Man of Athens': Democratic Theory and Advantage in Thucydides" *History of Political Thought* 39, no. 2 (Summer 2018): 241.

their self-restraint. The deficiencies of the rhetoric of the Mytilene Debate are not evidence of the need for Periclean statesmen so much as evidence of the pernicious unintended consequences of virtuous yet domineering leadership. Through his leadership and rhetoric, Pericles makes clear that his status as a leader places him above the desires of the people. His job is to defy their fickle desires. He models a leadership that makes a point of defying—and even denigrating—the people. The problem is that if the people accept that they can and should entrust him with the serious consideration of public matters, then they are no longer acting as a ruler. That they later struggle to exercise their power responsibly should be taken to reflect poorly on Pericles’ mode of rule, and to comment on the fallacy that democracy works best when people simply entrust to leaders the responsibility of considering policy seriously.

By understanding Pericles’ rule as contributing to a long-term problem, we can align Thucydides with Plato and Aristotle, both of whom recorded that he left the *demos* more corrupted than he found it. Plato’s Socrates argues that Pericles empowered the *demos*, but because he lacked sufficient knowledge or virtue the people were corrupted by his leadership and oratory.⁵ Aristotle focused on the consequences of naval democracy, since the sailors become confident and imposed constitutional changes to make the regime democratic in a narrow factional sense.⁶ Pericles is, in these accounts, a sort of “enabling demagogue,” who corrupts the people by empowering them to satiate their worst impulses.⁷ Socrates uses the analogy of pastry-making to explain the deleterious consequences of all oratory, including Pericles’. Orators offer

⁵ Plato, *Gorgias*, 515e-518.

⁶ Aristotle, *Ath. Con.*, XXVII.

⁷ Matthew Landauer, *Dangerous Counsel: Accountability and Advice in Ancient Greece* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2019), 153.

the people pastries rather than the nourishing food of a true political art.⁸ In so doing, they are not satiating an innate desire for pastries, but cultivating in them a taste for pastries. Socrates' condemnation of oratory is not a condemnation of the character of the people so much as a condemnation of the character of the people in a condition spoiled by oratory. Linking Thucydides to this tradition requires us simply to consider, with Plato and Aristotle, the possibility that the deliberative habits of the assembled people are affected over time by their leaders and the language they deploy.

Recognizing Thucydides as a critic of Pericles reminds us that good democratic politics is not encapsulated by good leadership. The proper attitude of the people towards a leader is not passive deference or simple trust. Rather, we should see in Thucydides a lesson about the need for a flexible and dynamic exchange between leaders acting as public advisers and the people acting as a ruler seeking advice. It is essential that in a democracy the people, conceiving of themselves as the ruler, do not abdicate their responsibility to understand the substance of public policy, and do not conclude that their responsibility ends with entrusting a representative.

While populism is a label that is rarely used for discussions of ancient Athens, and is even explicitly rejected as anachronistic by some, the ancient concerns with demagoguery or corrupted democracy map onto contemporary liberal concerns with populist leaders.⁹ By exploring Thucydides' concerns about the demagogic problem in Athens we can reclaim him for liberal democratic theory and simultaneously expand our own understanding of what a critique

⁸ Plato, *Gorgias*, 464c-465d.

⁹ Jan-Werner Müller somewhat hastily excludes Athens from the framework of populism: "There was no populism in ancient Athens; demagoguery perhaps, but no populism, since the latter exists only in representative systems." *What is Populism?* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2016), 57.

of populism entails. Specifically, we should be aware of the dangerous unintended effects of exceptional leaders, whose very capacity to unite us through patriotic appeals can leave us susceptible to the rhetoric of demagoguery that is waiting to take up such appeals for less noble ends. Patriotic leadership can pave the way for populist demagoguery.

The chapter will fall into three sections. First, I will outline the rhetorical similarities between Cleon and Pericles and argue that what at first appears to be a set of superficial similarities actually cohere around a fallacy of rule through trust that is inimical to democratic deliberation. Secondly, I will examine Pericles' mode of controlling the Assembly and argue that his particular mix of dominating control and limited responsiveness is unhealthy for a democracy, and appears to have detrimental consequences for the quality of Athenian debate and decision-making. Finally, I will briefly examine the post-Periclean deliberative landscape and find an implicit critique of Pericles running through these episodes. In concluding, I will note some contemporary resonances of this investigation: the Thucydidean antipathy towards demagoguery and his critique of a virtuous leader who unintentionally paved the way for demagogues has broad relevance for attempts to theorize democratic leadership, rhetoric, and judgment in a time when liberal democracy faces populist challenges.

Pericles and Cleon: Shared Rhetoric against Deliberation

The clearest indication that Thucydides is a critic of Pericles' mode of persuasion is that he gives Pericles a shared rhetoric with the demagogue Cleon. What at first might seem to be a somewhat random set of shared phrases in their speeches actually coheres around the theme of hostility to democratic deliberation. When Cleon takes up Pericles' words and uses them to demagogic purpose, the reader notices the demagogic implications of Pericles' lofty phrases. Cleon does not

distort so much as distill Pericles' political agenda.¹⁰ The verbal similarities between Pericles and Cleon thus indicate a substantive similarity: a hostility to the democratic tendency to discuss and reconsider public policy. We see this in their shared celebration of the unitary imperial city; their endorsement of decisive action (*ergon*) over argumentation (*logos*); and their characterization of the Assembly's reconsideration of policy as dangerous fickleness in contrast with their own personal constancy. As Arlene Saxonhouse has noted in looking to the vision of the city implied by their foreign policies, "we must see Cleon as the consequence of Pericles, carrying the Periclean vision of the Athenian regime to its extreme, as an unchanging uniformity that remains itself."¹¹ I develop this point further by dwelling on the language surrounding deliberation itself, under the assumption that the words that speakers have to say about deliberation likely affects how the audience conceives of, and engages in, deliberation.

In stressing the shared rhetoric of Cleon and Pericles, I hope to explore a connection that is too often dismissed as superficial.¹² For those who take the echo seriously, it is almost universally interpreted to show the deficiencies of Cleon by comparison with Pericles. Cairns reads the echo for evidence that Thucydides is partaking in a Homeric mode of characterization,

¹⁰ Maurice Pope notes that Cleon's way of talking about the democracy is "old-fashioned" in that it resonates with Pericles' speeches as well as with some lines from Aeschylus' *Prometheus Bound*. "Thucydides and Democracy," *Historia: Zeitschrift für Alte Geschichte* 37, no.3 (1988): 283, 285. Cf. Marc Cogan, who argues that Cleon's imperial policy is basically conservative in its commitment to maintaining the status quo. *The Human Thing: The Speeches and Principles of Thucydides' History*, 53-61. Cf. A.W. Gomme, "Four Passages in Thucydides," *The Journal of Hellenic Studies* 71 (1951): 78; H.D. Westlake notes that the echoes "must be designed to show that the attitude of Cleon towards the empire was based upon the principles of Pericles, though he believed in applying them with greater harshness." *Individuals in Thucydides* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1968), 65.

¹¹ Arlene W. Saxonhouse, *Athenian Democracy: Modern Mythmakers and Ancient Theorists* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1996), 73.

¹² Romilly, *Athenian Imperialism*, 163-171.

wherein “an ignoble character apes the arguments and words of a noble character,” specifically calling to mind Thersites’ low-class echoing of Achilles. Cairns concludes, “Thucydides is assuming as the background to his character portrayals a standard ancient type of moral assessment, in which actions and words take their worth from that of the actor or speaker.”¹³ All that matters, in this reading, is that the speaker is good or bad—the words themselves are secondary.

Cairn’s assumption that Thucydides can be read as continuing in pre-established traditions of explanation, particularly those prominent in myth, seems untenable. Thucydides presents himself as doing something new, particularly insofar as his work is not characterized by “the mythical” (I.22.4). Thucydides seems to be intent on upending traditional modes of explanation, and his mode of explanation focuses much less on individuals than does the writing of Herodotus, his older contemporary. In Thucydides’ account, speeches are often given to unnamed speakers, and Thucydides provides almost no personal information about any of the speakers’ characters. His presentation seems systematically designed to demonstrate that words are important and should not be praised or dismissed simply because of the character of the speaker.

Cleon’s verbal echoes reflect the reality that he follows in Pericles’ footsteps. As Connor has shown, Cleon’s ability to draw on the *demos* rather than the old aristocratic families for his influence was the culmination of a social-political change begun by Pericles. Before Pericles, politicians from the old aristocratic families controlled public affairs through networks of influence. Pericles was a new kind of politician who gained influence by sidestepping the

¹³ Francis Cairns, “Cleon and Pericles: A Suggestion,” *Journal of Hellenic Studies* 102 (1982): 204.

established networks and appealing directly to the assembled people. With these new kinds of politicians came a new and unrefined vocabulary shaped by the need to appeal directly to the common man.¹⁴ As Connor acknowledges, the innovative vocabulary of figures such as Cleon is almost entirely anticipated by Pericles. Cleon's difference from Pericles is little more than a difference of "style."¹⁵

Pericles' rhetoric marked a transition that leads directly to Cleon, which is probably why all of the classical sources besides Thucydides unambiguously condemn Pericles.¹⁶ Thucydides is more circumspect and nuanced, as he is interested in demonstrating Pericles' exceptional virtues as well as the unintended consequences of those virtues. Thucydides invites us to consider demagoguery and its accompanying deliberative decline as a result of, rather than a contrast with, apparently virtuous leadership. It is precisely when the people have been made complacent by a unifying patriotic leader such as Pericles—one moreover who commands a moral authority far beyond his capacity to persuade through words alone—that they are most susceptible to populist demagoguery.

The Unity of the Imperial City

To get a sense of the deliberative environment after Pericles has made his mark, I will jump ahead to Cleon's time. The Mytilene Debate (III.36-49) is the first debate Thucydides depicts at

¹⁴ W. R. Connor, *The New Politicians of Fifth-Century Athens* (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1992), 102-118.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 134.

¹⁶ Pericles' denigration of *apragmones* or quietists who attempt to remove themselves from the dirty business of politics can be read as a salvo against the elite class who were unsettled by the increasingly direct and democratic mode of politics. Whereas all other sources speak well of the *apragmones*, L.B. Carter points out that Pericles' funeral oration is the only source that gives us a derogatory opinion of this class. *The Quiet Athenian* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1986), 192.

Athens after the death of Pericles. Mytilene is the largest city on the largest island under Athens' control, and as such is indispensable to its empire. The Mytileneans rebel, but surrender unconditionally after a siege. The Athenians convene the Assembly and in a state of anger they decide to execute the entire male population and sell the women and children as slaves (III.36.2). The Athenians quickly have second thoughts about their harshness: "the next day they had an immediate change of mind, and a reconsideration, perceiving it to be a great and distasteful decision to destroy an entire city rather than just those responsible" (III.36.4).¹⁷ The Assembly hears dueling speeches from two newly introduced characters in the history: Cleon, who favors sticking to the initial decree, and Diodotus, who argues for repeal in favor of a more merciful policy. They hold a second vote and reverse course, sparing the general population of Mytilene.

The Mytilene Debate is the point at which we are introduced to full-throated demagoguery at Athens in the figure of Cleon. Thucydides' disdain for Cleon is undeniable, and is stronger than of any other individual in the history. Thucydides describes him as the "most violent" and the "most persuasive to the people" of all the citizens (III.36.6). Thucydides later depicts Cleon as the object of laughter in the Assembly (IV.28.5), as a warmongering obstacle to the Peace of Nicias (V.16), and as the original "demagogue" (*aner demagogos*) of the book (IV.21.3).¹⁸ Cleon ultimately dies a cowardly death attempting to flee from a battle that he bungles into (V.10.9), and Thucydides' final word on him is to cast aspersions on the reasons for

¹⁷ What I translate as "distasteful" is literally "raw" (ὀμὸν) as noted and discussed by Connor, who points out that the language of greatness seems to shift towards a more negative and barbaric association over the course of the history. *Thucydides*, 82n5.

¹⁸ Of course the word "demagogue" did not yet have a categorically pejorative meaning, but Thucydides leaves little doubt that he sees the new breed of populist figures exemplified by Cleon as a problem for collective decision-making. Melissa Lane, "The Origins of the Statesman-Demagogue Distinction in and after Ancient Athens," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 73, no. 2 (April 2012): 179-200.

his pro-war policy, claiming (with no evidence) that Cleon had hoped to distract from his own scandals and lend credence to his scurrilous accusations (V.16.1).¹⁹

In his speech in favor of sticking to the initial decision, Cleon frames the need to maintain an empire in starkly amoral terms that recall Pericles' imperial rhetoric. Perhaps the most famous shared expression between Cleon and Pericles is their description of Athens as a tyranny. Cleon tells the Athenians that "the empire you have is a tyranny" (III.37.2), echoing Pericles' final speech when he tells them "you hold your empire as a tyranny" (II.63.2). As such, Cleon urges the Athenians to disregard questions of fairness or justice and think only of preserving power (III.40.4). Both Cleon and Pericles note, in strikingly similar phrasing, that it is much too late for the Athenians to disentangle themselves from their empire and worry about being "do-gooders."²⁰ In this imperial mindset, assigning responsibility to citizens is easy: all citizens are implicated in a city's actions, just as all can take credit for its victories. Cleon insists that the entire population of Mytilene bears responsibility for the rebellion (III.39.6). This claim rests on the assumption that the rulers and the ruled cohere as a single agent. There is no option of distinguishing between elements of society or distinguishing between the actions of a government and the actions of its citizens. In this sense, as Arlene Saxonhouse has shown, Cleon prefigures modern international relations theorists who conceive of state-actors as unitary and

¹⁹ It is not unlikely that Thucydides is somewhat unfair to Cleon and his politics, but assessing the fairness of Thucydides' depiction is not within the scope of this investigation. A.G. Woodhead, "Thucydides' Portrait of Cleon," *Mnemosyne* 13 no. 4 (1960): 290; Wohl, *Love Among the Ruins*, 99. Saxonhouse, *Athenian Democracy*, 75n17.

²⁰ Both Cleon and Pericles use an odd verbal formulation, ἀνδραγαθίζομαι, which I translate as "to be a do-gooder." Romilly notes this echo, and that this verb is unique to these two instances in classical texts. *Imperialism*, 164

unidirectional.²¹ It is a vision built not on a domestic democratic understanding of the city as a community, but on an imperial vision of the city as a state-actor under which all differences between citizens are subsumed.²²

Both Pericles and Cleon place more emphasis on the Athenians' empire than their democratic institutions. In the funeral oration, Pericles exhorts his listeners to gaze upon the actions of the city on the world stage. Pericles declares that the city is an "example for others" (II.37.1), an "education for all of Greece," which has set up "lasting memorials of good and bad things" throughout Greece (II.41.4). Notably absent from Pericles' oration is any discussion of the institutions of democracy or of the Assembly. Pericles fails to mention the right of every citizen to speak up in the Assembly, and completely avoids any acknowledgment of the *demos*' status as the ruler responsible for the city's actions.²³ Rather than looking to their domestic institutions, Pericles urges the Athenians to evaluate their city on the basis of its international stature. Cleon's accusation that the Mytileneans are each individually guilty for their city's rebellion is a prosecutorial expression of Pericles' exhortation that citizens identify themselves with their city and its actions abroad.

²¹ Saxonhouse, "Deciding to Go to War: Who is Responsible?" in *Our Ancient Wars*, ed. Victor Caston and Silke-Maria Weineck (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2016): 177.

²² Saxonhouse, *Athenian Democracy*, 69-71.

²³ Gregory Vlastos notes this eloquent silence: "We should not forget that (I) the idea of the masses engaging in the actual business of government (as distinct from passing judgment on proposals put before it...is suppressed through the whole of this speech, and (II) Thucydides had ways to assert it quite explicitly had he wished to do so." "Isonomia Politikē," in *Platonic Studies* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1973), 196n123. Cf. Lowell Edmunds, who notes "...it is curious how little Pericles says about the *politeia* as a system of laws and how much, by comparison, about the practices and habits of the citizens... Pericles does not praise the structure of the constitution or the institutions but rather the spirit of Athenian life." *Chance and Intelligence in Thucydides* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1975), 47. Cf. Saxonhouse, *Athenian Democracy*, 64.

Favoring Deeds over Words

In addition to their shared vision of the city as a unity, Pericles and Cleon also voice a disapprobation of the Athenians' propensity for discussion, and endorse action instead. In the funeral oration, Pericles urges his audience,

Do not only contemplate words (*logos*) about benefit; anyone could drone on to you all, who know about it as well as he, speaking about the good things that accompany resisting enemies. Rather, gaze upon the power of the city in action (*ergon*) on a daily basis, and become her lovers (II.43.1).

Pericles minimizes the importance of debates about policy in favor of taking passionate action.

Pericles is denigrating *logos* in the sense both of the words used in debates and in the sense of rational thinking that words express. The contrast between *ergon* and *logos* is thematic to

Thucydides' history.²⁴ Indeed, the contrast was a staple of sophistic speech-making, in which

logos was taken to be more powerful than *ergon*.²⁵ Pericles takes the traditional antithesis

between the two terms to indicate a real opposition, but unlike the sophists he favors *ergon*.²⁶ He

²⁴ Adam Parry, *Logos and Ergon in Thucydides* (New York: Arno Press, 1981); "Thucydides' Historical Method," *Yale Classical Studies* 22 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1972). Cf. J.S. Rusten, *Thucydides: The Peloponnesian War, Book II* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 7-16.

²⁵ Crane, *The Blinded Eye*, 218-220. John Denniston goes so far as to argue that Thucydides uses the contrast merely as a stylistic crutch to satisfy the "common craze" in Greek writing of the period for "verbal antithesis." As such, in the funeral oration "the form controls the content, not the content the form." *Greek Prose Style* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1952), 13. Given that Thucydides has no qualms giving us poorly balanced sentences throughout the history, I find this argument unconvincing.

²⁶ Mara notes the irony of Pericles' rhetoric: "Though he is praised for his speaking, his rhetoric subordinates speech to action." "Thucydides and the Problem of Citizenship," 316. Pericles does celebrate Athenians' balance of *logos* with *ergon* at II.40.2, noting that they are unique in "not believing words to be an impediment to action but rather believing it an impediment to arrive at action without being taught by words beforehand." I take this to be a more conventional descriptive point, that the Athenians generally pride themselves on both their loquaciousness and

even begins the funeral oration by denigrating his coming speech as a mere *logos*, when the deeds (*erga*) of the fallen are sufficiently celebrated by present deeds such as the public funeral rites (II.35.1). Likewise, Pericles contrasts a mere “din of words” (*kompos logōn*) with the “truth of deeds” (*alētheia ergōn*) (II.41.2).

Thucydides does not share Pericles’ endorsement of *ergon* over *logos*.²⁷ In his statement of method at I.22, he commits to a true presentation of the “facts” as well as a reasonable reconstruction of “what was said,” indicating a belief that there need be no opposition between the two.²⁸ And Thucydides depicts at various junctures the negative political consequences of opposing *logos* in favor of *ergon*.²⁹ Bad decisions consistently result from debates where discussion is dismissed as empty wordiness. For example, at the outbreak of the war, the Spartan king Archidamus, the only Spartan who demonstrates a full awareness of the difficulty of the upcoming war (II.11), and a figure praised explicitly by Thucydides as “a man held to be both

their daring actions, which is in tension with Pericles’ later exhortation to action. It is also followed by the flattering and ridiculous claim that the Athenians are beloved for conferring benefits to others rather than taking from them (II.40.4), so I take this part of the speech to be more flattery than a prescriptive standard.

²⁷ Contra Josiah Ober, who sees in Thucydides a “priority of *erga* over *logoi*” as evidence of a broader critique of democratic forms of knowledge, which are based on contestation and speech. “Civic Ideology and Counterhegemonic Discourse: Thucydides on the Sicilian Debate,” in *Athenian Identity and Civic Ideology*, ed. Alan L. Boegehold and Adele C. Scafuro (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1994), 117. I am unconvinced that claiming to write about facts devalues speech or constitutes an epistemic critique of speech-based forms of political communication and decision-making in general or of democratic ideology in particular. Thucydides, is, after all, more famous for writing the speeches than for narrating the deeds of the war.

²⁸ Thucydides generally defines *erga* as “facts” in contrast with Pericles, who take it as “deeds.” Henry H. Immerwahr, “History as Monument in Herodotus and Thucydides,” *The American Journal of Philology* 81, no. 3 (July 1960): 276-279.

²⁹ David Bedford and Thom Workman note that “the eclipse of *logos* by *ergon*” is a tragic theme in Thucydides. “The Tragic Reading of the Thucydidean Tragedy,” *Review of International Studies* 26, no. 1 (2001): 59.

intelligent (*xunetos*) and moderate (*sophron*)” (I.79), praises careful deliberation (I.80-85).³⁰ His foresight about the difficulty of the war and his assessment of the sources of Athens’ strength echo Pericles’ assessment (I.144) as well as Thucydides’ authorial assessment (II.65). He is opposed by Sthenelaidas, a crude and unreflective speaker who starts his rebuttal by announcing “Many words have been spoken and I don’t understand them” (I.86.1) and finishes his speech with the claim that “it is fitting for doers of injustice to need to spend time deliberating” but the Spartans, confident in their moral rightness, do not need to waste their time doing so (I.86.4). The Spartans go to war without an exit strategy, assuming it will end quickly, and their foolish lack of preparation for a protracted conflict quickly becomes apparent. A more considered approach would have served the Spartans well.

Perhaps the clearest indication of Thucydides’ distaste for placing actions over and against words comes in his description of the breakdown of society during the civil strife (*stasis*) at Corcyra. During a hyper-partisan factional conflict, Thucydides writes of people publicly murdering each other in an anarchic bloodbath, and he emphasizes the distortion of language that occurs in such times: “People claimed the right to change the received value of words in relation to action” (III.82.4), with the eventual result that “those with the lowest intelligence most often prevailed: they feared their own deficiencies and the intelligence of their opponents. And they feared lest, through their inferiority in words, scheming people would overcome them with subtlety in debate; so they were resolving things with daring action” (II.83.3). When people believe that there is a real conflict between *logos* and *ergon*, we see the worst kind of social

³⁰ Richard Ned Lebow notes that for Thucydides *xunetos* is “the highest word of praise in his lexicon.” *The Tragic Vision of Politics: Ethics, Interests and Orders* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 85.

deterioration.³¹ Pericles' endorsement of action over speeches runs counter to Thucydides' own method and his description of the disastrous implications of prioritizing *ergon* over *logos*.

In the Mytilene Debate, Cleon takes up the Periclean preference for *ergon* over *logos*. According to Cleon, democracy is unfit for maintaining an empire because the people are too susceptible to the arguments of speakers and too taken with the “the pleasure of words” (III.40.2). Cleon's speech is run through with hostility to “pleasing words” (III.38.2), and the recurring complaint that the Athenians trust speakers for information from which they reach judgments, “not trusting in what deeds you have seen for yourself, so much as what you hear spoken about it, placing value on beautiful words” (III.38.4). The demagogue does not simply seek to defeat his opponent in debate, but seeks to undermine the Athenians' commitment to the process of debate in the first place. He draws on Periclean rhetoric to attack the basic tenets of democratic rule.

Personal Constancy vs. Popular Fickleness

Perhaps the most prominent and revealing rhetorical thread linking Pericles and Cleon is the celebration of their personal constancy as superior to the fickleness of the people. In his initial speech on the decision to go to war, Pericles is introduced making what eventually becomes his trademark claim of constancy:

I am of the same mind, Athenians, as always—not to give way to the Peloponnesians; however, people clearly are not persuaded to go to war in the same mood (*orgē*) as they in fact wage it, and change their minds in the face of misfortunes. I see, therefore, that I must give the same or equivalent counsel... (I.140.1).

³¹ On this theme more broadly in Thucydides, James Boyd White, *When Words Lose Their Meaning*, chap. 3.

Pericles associates himself with constancy and charges the people he addresses with fickleness in the face of hardship. Pericles repeats this characterization in his final speech, which comes at a moment of crisis for his control of the city. After a second invasion by the Spartans, the Athenians change their minds and want to sue for peace. They assign responsibility for their painful situation to Pericles, who calls the Assembly to assuage their anger. Pericles states that he anticipated their anger, but that it is misplaced—he has considered the good of the whole city, rather than anyone’s private good. He stresses his integrity, reiterating his claim to virtuous constancy in contrast with popular fickleness that stems from stupidity:

I myself am the same man and have not changed, but you have changed course: since it happened that you were persuaded while still unharmed, but are filled with regret now that you have suffered bad things, and in the weakness of your judgment my reasoning now seems faulty...in the face of great and sudden developments, you lack the strength of mind to persevere in what you decided. The mind is enslaved by what is unforeseen, unexpected, and most incalculable...(II.61.2-3).

Pericles insults popular judgment by denigrating the demos’ proclivity to reconsider issues. The *demos* is too reactive and unstable to maintain a steady course and stick to his intelligent policy.

Cleon echoes this aspect of Pericles’ rhetoric. When urging death for the Mytileneans, he contrasts his constancy with the fickleness of the people, declaring “I myself am of the same mind” (III.38.1), while urging the people “not to change your minds about your prior decisions.” According to Cleon, any change of course is unworthy of the city and undermines the pursuit of empire. The people are distracted by appeals to “pity” and “equanimity” (III.40.2) and should realize that ruling an empire requires consistency and disregard of all concerns besides self-interest. He notes that empire requires credible deterrence, and that the fickleness of democracy necessarily undercuts its credibility. Cleon radicalizes Pericles’ argument by directly stating that “democracy is incapable of maintaining an empire” (III.37.1), but both the basis of his critique

and his conclusion that the fickleness of the people is an imperial liability are established by Pericles.³²

Cleon's and Pericles' celebration of their own constancy and denigration of popular fickleness is a criticism that strikes at the heart of democracy. Democracy's distinctive strength over other types of regimes is that it tolerates a multiplicity of perspectives and has the flexibility to change leaders and change course.³³ This is particularly true of Assembly-based decision-making at Athens, where the equal right of any citizen to speak up (*isēgoria*), the equal status under the law (*isonomia*) and the obligation to speak frankly before the *demos* even in opposition to popular policy (*parrhēsia*) were central and defining values.³⁴ In Thucydides we see that the

³² James A. Andrews sees a further connection between Cleon and Pericles' funeral oration, as both attempt to defend a proper way of combining democracy and empire. While for Pericles freedom is consonant with empire, for Cleon, the rule of the people, freed from the sophistries of elite orators is capable of maintaining an empire. "Cleon's Ethopoetics," *The Classical Quarterly* 44, no. 1 (1994): 26-39. I think Andrews undervalues the extent to which Cleon's explicit denigration of δημοκρατία should be taken at face value. He is frustrated by the possibility of a second debate, and he recognizes that this is the kind of behavior endemic to democracy.

³³ Saxonhouse, *Athenian Democracy*, 78-85. Cf. Monoson and Loriaux, "Illusion of Power," 288n8, (citing Saxonhouse): "...steadfast devotion to a policy is a stance uncharacteristic of democratic assemblies—their distinguishing mark is the tentative, reversible status of all decisions."

³⁴ On *parrhēsia*, see also Matthew Landauer, "Parrhesia and the Demos Tyrannos: Frank Speech, Flattery, and Accountability in Ancient Athens," *History of Political Thought* 33, no. 2 (2012): 185-208. S. Sara Monoson, *Plato's Democratic Entanglements* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000), chap. 2. Ryan Balot, "Free Speech, Courage, and Democratic Deliberation," in *Free Speech in Classical Antiquity*, ed. Ineke Sluiter and Ralph M. Rosen (Leiden: Brill, 2004), 240-1. On *isonomia* and the distinctive democratic deliberative implications of this term, see John Lombardini, "'Isonomia' and the Public Sphere in Democratic Athens," *History of Political Thought* 34, no. 3 (Autumn 2013): 393-420. On *isēgoria*, see Ober, *Mass and Elite in Democratic Athens: Rhetoric, Ideology, and the Power of the People* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989), 78-9; Landauer, "Demos (a)kurios? Agenda Power and Democratic Control in Ancient Greece," *European Journal of Political Theory* (forthcoming). Alex Gottesman, "The Concept of Isēgoria," *Polis* 38 (2021): 175-198. For a summary of recent scholarship on *isēgoria* (in the context of an argument that downplays its importance in practice) see Daniela Cammack, "Deliberation in Ancient Greek Assemblies," *Classical Philology* 115, no. 3 (2020): 486-522.

Athenian tendency to litigiousness (which necessarily carries the possibility of more than one outcome) is referenced as a point of pride (I.77), while important decisions are often debated more than once.³⁵ Insofar as their practices of reconsideration get in the way of an uncomplicated and simple imperial policy, both Cleon and Pericles denigrate it, and, with it, a core feature of democracy. Denigration of reconsideration is denigration of anything other than the single-mindedness of an autocrat.³⁶

Cleon's hostility to reconsideration is the central theme of his speech. His critique is of both the kinds of speakers who dare to oppose what has already been decided, and of the people for allowing such opposition:

The most terrible of all is if nothing we decree will be kept firm, and if we do not understand that a city is stronger with inferior but immovable laws than if it has good laws that lack authority; that ignorance with moderation is more beneficial than cleverness with license; and that the more common men are for the most part better than the more intelligent men at managing cities. For these wish to appear wiser than the laws and to prevail over what has been said in the public interest, since there is no better way for them to make clear their judgment, as a result of which they are oftentimes causing the defeat of their cities; while those others, not trusting in their own intelligence, think it fitting to be less wise than the laws and less capable of finding fault with an argument than one speaking beautifully, so, being judges on an equal footing, rather than contestants, they for the most part set a good course. We should therefore do likewise and not be led on by the cleverness and wittiness of a contest to advise you, the public, contrary to your opinion (*para doxan*) (III.37.3).

³⁵ See their reconsideration of aiding Corcyra (I.44.1), the Mytilene Debate (II.36) and the Sicilian Debate (VI.8)—all are the second assemblies to address a prior decision. Nicias compares the benefit of reconsideration to a doctor curing a sickness: “put it to a vote and also place before the Athenians the opinions...considering that you would be as a doctor to a city that [previously] deliberated badly...” (VI.15).

³⁶ Their shared denigration of their audience brings to mind Socrates' argument in the *Gorgias* that the orator and the sophist both denigrate opposition to themselves. *Gorgias*, 520a-b.

Cleon's view of deliberation is hostile because the speakers use clever words to oppose the opinion or will (*para doxa*) of the people (III.37.5).³⁷ Any reconsideration of a prior decision implies that the people were wrong the first time, and that the speaker has superior knowledge and can, through reconsideration, lead the people to a better decision. Cleon resents the implication that the people's initial inclination could be wrong, so he celebrates unchanging firmness of will over and against change. Just as there is no room for productive dissent or brave advisers, there is no room for the people to reconsider and learn through the deliberative process. For Cleon, there is a singular popular will which he is defending, and the Assembly exists to express the will of the people, not to change course or to educate the people. Those speakers who challenge what has been previously decided are a danger to the survival of the city.³⁸

To summarize the link between Cleon and Pericles: they share the stifling ideal of the unitary imperial city; a preference for decisive action (*ergon*) over words (*logos*); and the denigration of democratic reconsideration as nothing more than the fickleness of the crowd. All of these commitments devalue consideration or reconsideration in the making of public policy. By giving Pericles and the demagogue Cleon this particular shared set of commitments, we can understand Thucydides to be highlighting the ways in which Pericles shares with a later demagogue an antipathy to the freewheeling open-endedness of Assembly debate, a hallmark of democratic practice.³⁹ Cleon's echoes of Pericles help us to look back and understand the

³⁷ I take the *doxa* to refer to the people's opinion (and not the speaker's better judgment), and agree with Andrews that it plays on the association with popular decree, which would be denoted by including the definite article. "Cleon's Ethopoetics," 36-7.

³⁸ "This amounts to a silencing of dissenting opinion, which carries a clear implication of 'mass tyranny.'" Andrews, "Cleon's Hidden Appeals (Thucydides 3.37-40)" *Classical Quarterly* 50, no. 1 (2000): 58.

³⁹ Contra Victoria Wohl, who sees in Thucydides' treatment of Cleon the construction of a rhetorical foil against which both his own text and Pericles' speaking seem reasonable and

unhealthy and anti-deliberative implications of Pericles' rhetoric. Below we will explore the proposition that Pericles not only prefigures, but bears responsibility for, the shortcomings of the Assembly's subsequent decision-making.

Pericles' Domination: Usurping the Rule of the People

Having shown that Pericles establishes the rhetoric of demagoguery at Athens, this chapter will now examine his style of leadership and look for other evidence of Pericles' legacy on Athenian deliberation. I find such evidence in both Thucydides' descriptive language of Pericles' leadership and in his authorial encomium to Pericles.

The vocabulary of persuasion that Thucydides uses to describe Pericles' speeches raises some red flags. The depiction of Pericles and the language used to describe his distinctive mode of persuasion both indicate a dissonance between Pericles' self-understanding and Thucydides' assessment of Pericles. After Pericles' first speech, Thucydides writes:

Pericles spoke such things. The Athenians, believing him to have made the best proposal, voted as he ordered (*ekeleue*), and responded to the Lacedaemonians according to his opinion, doing as he indicated (*ephrase*) with respect to the details and overall (I.145).

Traditionally in the Athenian Assembly, speakers would cast themselves as advisers to the people, who are themselves characterized as an unaccountable ruler.⁴⁰ If we look to Thucydides' descriptive words, we see him describing Pericles as a commander more than an adviser. Rather than giving political counsel based on the word for deliberating together (*symbolleuein*), the

appropriately measured in their pleasurable, *Love Among the Ruins*, 100. Also contra Eirene Visvardi, who sees in Cleon's impassioned rhetoric proof of the importance of a properly balanced but still emotionally informed collective reasoning, which only Pericles could provide. *Emotion in Action*, 48, 80, 93.

⁴⁰ Matthew Landauer, *Dangerous Counsel*, 6-11 and passim.

traditional word for a speaker in the Assembly, we see that he is either “exhorting,” “indicating,” or even, most strikingly “ordering” (*ekeleue*), which is the same word that normally would describe the commands of a general to troops. It is also notable that when Pericles addresses the Athenians he uses slight variations of words that convey disdain. At I.140.1, for “persuasion” he uses the word *ana-peitho* rather than the more common *peitho*. The addition of the prefix adds a connotation of passivity, as of being manipulated towards a conclusion by another person, and had additional negative meanings linked to seduction and deception.⁴¹

Thucydides also never depicts Pericles engaging with another speaker, even though we are led to believe there was resistance to his proposals. In this way, Thucydides dramatically demonstrates Pericles’ commanding presence. From the readers’ perspective, Pericles is uniquely unchallenged in offering the only word on every subject. He never appears to the reader as a real participant of a democracy, if we understand healthy democracy to entail facing real alternatives to a leader and his policies.⁴² Nor does Pericles evince any respect for the rights of the people as rulers. Even during the funeral oration, when he is flattering the Athenians in contrast with other citizenries, Pericles denigrates their ability to come up with policy: “we Athenians are able to make correct judgments on public policy, if not originate it” (2.40.2). Pericles even prevents the

⁴¹ Looking here and throughout to *A Greek-English Lexicon*, ed. Henry George Liddell, Robert Scott, Henry Stuart Jones (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1940).

⁴² Finley, *Thucydides*, 323. Saxonhouse, *Athenian Democracy*, 70. John Zumbunnen, *Silence and Democracy: Athenian Politics in Thucydides’ History* (State College: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2008), 5. Cf. Emily Greenwood, who sees Pericles as imposing silence on the people, a status “inimical to Athenian deliberation” as a strategy “to restrict their freedom of expression.” “Making Words Count: Freedom of Speech and Narrative in Thucydides” in *Free Speech in Classical Antiquity*, 177. Alternatively, Maurice Pope sees “sectarian” divide as Thucydides’ overarching concern, and argues that Pericles is praised because he is a “leader of the city as a whole” while those who follow were mere “sectarian leaders.” “Thucydides and Democracy,” 277, 284.

Assembly from convening during a delicate moment of his rule because he fears it might not be manageable (II.22.1).⁴³ Pericles is committed to democracy only insofar as it equates with his rule.⁴⁴ Even Pericles' celebrated defense of freedom does not amount to an endorsement of productive dissent: Pericles carefully frames Athenian freedom as the tolerance of each other in their private lives and an active participation in holding public offices (II.37.2).⁴⁵ The image that emerges is of patriotic service of the city with no mention of an obligation to dissent, give good advice, or be open to reconsideration of a decision already made.

Thucydides' Encomium for Pericles

The most important passage for understanding Thucydides' opinion of Pericles is his encomium that follows Pericles' final speech. Making a rare authorial comment, Thucydides praises Pericles as a leader superior to those who followed him and as an intelligent strategist of war whose strategy was not subsequently followed, to disastrous effect. This passage is generally taken as the primary evidence that Thucydides endorses Pericles' leadership.⁴⁶ Alternatively,

⁴³ Similarly, he convinces the Assembly not to hear Spartan messengers once the fighting starts. He limits the possibility for reconsideration and the ability of the Spartans to make any offers that might lead to peace (II.12.2). See Greenwood on this as "suppressing the voices of his fellow Athenians in the conviction that he...knows best." "Making Words Count," 185.

⁴⁴ Ober notes that the Athenian people's "capacity to err" is contrasted with "the innate genius" of their leaders. "By implication, as long as the inherently error-prone Athenians follow the advice and accept the leadership of inherently insightful men, all will be well." I think Ober captures the Periclean arrogance and dismissal of the capacities and character of the Athenian people, but too quickly assigns this view to Thucydides himself. *Political Dissent in Democratic Athens* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998), 82. Cf. David Grene, who notes that Pericles' speeches convey to his audience that they are being managed and controlled. *Greek Political Theory*, 87.

⁴⁵ James A. Andrews, "Pericles on the Athenian Constitution (Thuc. 2.37)" *The American Journal of Philology* 125, no.4 (2004): 539-561.

⁴⁶ A.W. Gomme reads it as an endorsement of precisely the dominating leadership that I have been describing: "The implication...is that in spite of the shortcomings of Kleon, Nikias,

scholars who have found a critique of Pericles in Thucydides' narrative often neglect to scrutinize the terms of Thucydides' explicit praise of Pericles. Certainly, his praise cannot be discounted.⁴⁷ Yet the wording of the encomium supports a reading critical of Pericles' political leadership for two reasons: Firstly, the grammar and vocabulary of the sentence that compares Pericles and his successors allows one to read it as assigning some responsibility to Pericles for the very inferiority of his successors. Secondly, and more importantly, Thucydides explains that Pericles rules through his personal prestige without genuinely persuading his audience by way of his argumentation. The people support him because he is Pericles, not because of the quality of his speeches.⁴⁸ Thus, Pericles contributes to a politics of prestige that over-emphasizes the issue of trust, and he conditions the *demos* not to exercise their judgment beyond the basic task of selecting a leader.

Thucydides' encomium of Pericles is as follows:

For as long as he was the leader of the city in the time of peace, he led the way in a measured manner and guarded it steadfastly, and in his time it became greatest; and after the war broke out, it seems in this matter he correctly anticipated [the city's] power. Pericles lived on for two years and six months. And after he died, his foresight about the war was recognized still more. For he said they would prevail if they remained quiet, looked after the navy, did not expand their empire during the war, and did not risk the city. But they did the opposite in all these matters and in other matters seemingly

Alkibiades, and the rest, it would at least have been better for Athens if any one of them had been influential enough to dominate policy for a length of time." "Four Passages in Thucydides," 70n5.

⁴⁷ Martha Taylor argues that Thucydides' assessment at II.65 is simply ironic and is overturned by the rest of the text. *Thucydides, Pericles, and the Idea of Athens in the Peloponnesian War* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 89, 272. Some examples of thoughtful readings that nonetheless fail to do justice to the encomium of Pericles include Christopher Bruell, "Thucydides and Perikles," *St. John's Review* 32, no. 3 (summer, 1981): 24-29; Monoson and Loriaux, "Illusion of Power"; Michael Palmer, "Love of Glory and the Common Good," *The American Political Science Review* 76, no. 4 (December, 1982): 825-836.

⁴⁸ In this I see Thucydides as likely pushing back against a contemporary consensus (which survives in later sources) that Pericles was an intoxicatingly persuasive speech-maker. But it is impossible to say this with certainty.

unrelated to the war: on account of private ambitions and private gain they conducted political matters badly both for themselves and for their allies—matters which if they were successful brought honor and benefit to private persons, but if they failed brought harm to the city in the war. The reason/responsibility (*aition*) for this is that Pericles, on the one hand, empowered because of personal prestige (*axiomata*) and knowledge, and being conspicuously most incorruptible by bribes, freely controlled the majority, and he led them more than he was led by them; on account of not acquiring power by unfitting means, but by reputation, he was able to speak not for their pleasure, but even to contradict them despite their anger. Whenever, then, he perceived that from *hubris* they were confident beyond due measure, he spoke and brought them down to fearfulness; and whenever they were unreasonably fearful he brought them back up again to courageousness. So it happened that what was in name a democracy was in fact rule by the first man. But those who came after, on the other hand, were more equal to each other, and each of them, in grasping to become the first man, directed even public affairs so as to accord with the pleasures of the people (II.65).

Even if we take this passage to be straightforward praise of Pericles as a man whose unique virtue allows him to restrain the people's worst impulses, we must at least acknowledge that this assessment is run through with irony. Not only is the great eulogizer of Athenian democracy not in reality presiding over a democracy, but Thucydides highlights the strategic vision of the leader responsible for the disastrous war, and emphasizes the foresight of the man who could not foresee the contingencies of that war, including the plague that would claim his own life. Taken in context, it is difficult to read the praise of Pericles without noting that it also highlights his failures.⁴⁹

⁴⁹ Cf. Connor, who notes "Pericles' last speech and the valedictory comments on him, then, do not provide an encapsulation of Thucydides' views about the war or a resolution to the interpretive problem of the text. They maintain, even intensify, the conflict between the reader's foreknowledge of the cost and outcome of the war and his appreciation of the analysis of power presented in the work. The ironic perspective continues." *Thucydides*, 74. Cf. Orwin, who notes that "Thucydides' praise of Pericles' war policy is precise and therefore limited... The 'eulogy' thus implies, in what it says and what it does not, a critique of Pericles." "Review Essay on Thucydides," *Political Theory* 28, no. 6 (Dec., 2000): 862.

The ambiguous grammar of the single long sentence contrasting Pericles with his successors also complicates a straightforwardly positive reading. It allows for a reading that assigns some responsibility to Pericles. The “reason,” cause, or responsibility (*aition*)—referring back to the destructive private ambitions of those who followed Pericles—seems to refer to the entire following sentence. It is thus linked first to Pericles’ own relationship to the *demos*, and then to the leaders subsequent to Pericles. It could be read not simply a contrast but a pairing of Pericles and those who follow him as all part of the *aition*. Far from absolving Pericles for the failures of Athens, there may be a shared responsibility between Pericles and the leaders who followed. The “reason” for the destructive policies proposed and adopted by the Athenians, which cut against Pericles’ specific proposals, has to do with the transition from Pericles’ mode of ruling through personal prestige to his successors’ ruling through obsequiousness to popular pleasures. Insofar as the reason encapsulates the entirety of the following sentence, as it appears to, it raises the question of how Pericles’ (admittedly superior) mode of leadership might have contributed to deterioration that followed.

Mark Fisher has asserted that the *aition* here defies the fifth-century expectation of a “moralized causal story,” and that in place of a story of responsibility Thucydides is offering a “scientific” cause of Athenian defeat as a technical problem with the structure of Athenian leadership competition.⁵⁰ It would seem to me to precisely convey a “moralized causal story,” one in which the successors of Pericles bear the principal blame, but which may include Pericles himself. This would place Pericles squarely in the vein of tragic rulers—not of the tragic warner that Fisher claims—whose actions contribute to bringing about precisely the outcome that they

⁵⁰ Mark Fisher, “Thucydides’s Tragic Science of Democratic Defeat,” *Review of Politics* 84, no. 1 (2022): 40.

seek to avoid.⁵¹ Foresight in this sense is a deeply tragic gift—Pericles understood with great accuracy the capacity of the Athenian empire to withstand the economic pressures of war, and this knowledge leads him to an unwarranted confidence, neglecting the local and political factors that ultimately undermined the city. He reminds us not so much of a Solon advising a tyrannical demos, as of a Croesus whose foreknowledge was incomplete and therefore destructive. Pericles may have had foresight about “the war,” but he lacked a broader foresight about domestic politics and his own legacy therein.

A shared responsibility linking Pericles and his successors is further hinted at in Thucydides’ description of the post-Periclean leaders as striving to emulate Pericles. In the sentence that follows the above passage, Thucydides notes, “those who came after were more equal to each other and each of them, *in grasping to become the first man (prōtos anēr)*, directed even public affairs so as to accord with the pleasures of the people” [emphasis added] (II.65.11). It is precisely their desire to emulate Pericles and their competition for the Periclean office of “first man” that leads them to mismanage public policy. Pericles’ model of leadership proves destructive for the city.⁵² In book VI, the enemies of Alcibiades each hope to become “pre-eminent (*proestantai*) before the *demos*” and to be “first” (*protoi*) (VI.28.2). Likewise, in Book VIII Thucydides shows the short-lived oligarchic government of Four Hundred is undone by rivalries because everyone is keen to achieve Periclean status: “all of them thought it appropriate

⁵¹ See Fisher, “Thucydides’s Tragic Science,” 39

⁵² Mara notes a “disquieting continuity” in Thucydides’ phrasing linking Pericles and his successors, but does not develop a reading of the encomium. *The Civic Conversations of Thucydides and Plato* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2008), 115.

not to be equals, but that he himself be first (*prōtos*) by far..." (VIII.89.3). The prospect of becoming a "first man" leads the ruling class to self-destructive internecine conflicts.⁵³

It is possible, then, to link Pericles' inferior successors to Pericles and to include Pericles as part of the reason (*aition*) for the badly done politics of his aftermath. But what are we to make of Pericles' vaunted willingness to counteract the people? Is this not the definition of statesmanship—doing the right thing even when it is unpopular?

I think that Thucydides has reservations about precisely this kind of leadership because it is a distortion of a democracy. Pericles' distortion of Athenian democracy is captured in the famous phrase, "what was in name a democracy was in fact rule (*archē*) by the first man." Pericles rules over the Athenians in a dominating fashion. The choice of the word *archē* is notable because it is generally associated with imperial rule, as in the Athens' enslavement of other cities. The implication is that his rule is less democratic than imperial.⁵⁴ His ability to "freely control" the majority indicates that he rules unchecked by any concern for popular objections.⁵⁵ Pericles' confidence in the power of his reputation is such that he disregards criticism and rules with a free hand and thus makes a democracy into a form of autocracy.

⁵³ It is worth noting that this word for "first" is not the same that Thucydides uses to describe the demagogue Athenagoras in Syracuse, who is labeled as "foremost among the people" (δήμου προστάτης) (VI.35.2), nor is it applied to Cleon, who is labeled the "most persuasive to the people" (III.36.6). The status of "first" seems to have been a special category that applied only to leaders who achieved a status beyond influence among their own class.

⁵⁴ James V. Morrison, *Reading Thucydides* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2006), 148.

⁵⁵ This is a contested passage, as ἐλευθέρως could be taken to refer either to Pericles and his manner of rule, or to the Athenian people's manner of being ruled. I follow Rusten (*The Peloponnesian War, Book II*, 210) and Greenwood ("Making Words Count," 184-5) that the adverb refers to Pericles. Cf. Lowell Edmunds and Richard Martin, "Thucydides 2.65.8," *Harvard Studies in Classical Philosophy* 81 (1977): 187-193. But Simon Hornblower argues that it refers back to the people and their manner of being ruled. *A Commentary on Thucydides* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991), v.1, ad loc.

Controlling the majority “freely” was likely a loaded term in the context of Athenian democracy. In Aristophanes’ political play *The Knights*, the character Demos is a master (*despotēs*) whose slaves represent the speakers in the Assembly seeking to win him over.⁵⁶ Any free citizen in Athens had the right to own slaves, and Thucydides links the status of Athens as a free city with their ability to rule over other cities (III.45.6). Freedom, in the ancient Greek context, was supported by slavery.⁵⁷ As such, if Pericles is truly ruling freely, the implication may be that he has reduced the *demos* to a slave-like state, and in so doing upended the normal order of things.

It is not uncommon to interpret this passage as Thucydides’ endorsement of autocratic rule and his strongest condemnation of democracy—if Athens “became greatest” when it was only nominally a democracy, it would seem to follow that he does not support democracy, or at least he does not support it beyond the unifying rule of a dominating personality.⁵⁸ This assumes that Thucydides considers “greatness” to be a good thing, which is not at all clear.⁵⁹ We see, for example, that Thucydides describes the possible execution of the Mytileneans a “great” but at the same time “savage” thing to do (III.62.2). Further, we should keep in mind that short-term

⁵⁶ Aristophanes, *The Knights*, 40.

⁵⁷ Plato, *Laws*, 694a-c.

⁵⁸ Mark Fisher provides the most recent example of this line of thinking: “The critical contribution of Periclean leadership to Athenian success, therefore, was not so much expert understanding of the political system that he led, but his ability to maintain civic cohesion through his superlative prestige.” “Thucydides’s Tragic Science,” 45. Cf. Yunis, *Taming Democracy*, 33. Virginia Hunter, “Thucydides and the Sociology of the Crowd,” *The Classical Journal* 84, no. 1 (1988): 17-30.

⁵⁹ Connor points out that the greatness acquires increasingly negative and barbaric association over the course of the history. *Thucydides*, 82, fn. 5. Contra Fisher, *Heroic Democracy*, 95. Edith Foster claims that this assessment merely shows the popular perception of Pericles, and is not authorial, but I think it more fruitful to take this praise as authorial and interrogate what is implied and what is left out of its scope. *Thucydides, Pericles, and Periclean Imperialism*, 213.

success can be contribute to long-term failure. The failure of Pericles may be precisely that he distorts Athenian democracy into an autocracy and thereby undermines its democratic institutions. The success of the city under his rule can be analogized to bowling with guardrails in the gutter: this helps run up a high score, but it prevents the development of proper bowling skills, at best, and at worst develops habits that must be unlearned once the guardrails are removed. Thus, Thucydides' comparative praise of Pericles as superior to his successors should not be read as a comparison between two distinct forms of government, but an illustration of the rapid deterioration that follows from Pericles' distinctively autocratic rule.⁶⁰

Substituting Reputation for Persuasion

There are two specific problems in Pericles' mode of controlling the Assembly that are implicit in Thucydides' encomium. First, Pericles' control of the Assembly through personal prestige is a poor substitute for controlling the Assembly by having the better argument. Thucydides leaves little doubt that Pericles' proposals are compelling largely because it is Pericles who voices them.⁶¹ Thus, Pericles conditions the Assembly to substitute personal trustworthiness for exercising their judgment. Second, Pericles' ability to manipulate the emotions of the people undermines deliberation, in that he marshals his unique ability in order to prevent meaningful debate and the exercise of democratic judgment.

⁶⁰ In the following I develop a line of thought hinted at by Monoson and Loriaux: "Perhaps the success of Pericles' policies was...predicated on the subversion of normal institutions of Athenian democracy." "Illusion of Power," 288n8.

⁶¹ Perry notes that this is central to Pericles' rule, and as such to any model of democratic governance that Pericles might provide, "Pericles as a 'Man of Athens'," 257.

With respect to the first point, it is striking that Thucydides' assessment differs from Pericles' self-assessment in a key respect: his ability to inform his audience by clearly and persuasively articulating his ideas: "I believe that I am inferior to no one in knowing what is needful and in explaining it" (II.60.5), he declares. Pericles claims to believe he is educating his audience when he speaks to them, but Thucydides is completely silent on this key point.⁶² Thucydides thereby indicates that while Pericles may have believed that he genuinely persuaded the people on the basis of a superior argument and that they were improved by such argumentation, in reality he got his way in the Assembly because he was Pericles. He did not persuade the people by means of his arguments. He persuaded by means of his character, which was known before he said a word. He "freely controlled the majority" because of his personal prestige, not because of his compelling arguments.⁶³ A close look at the Greek supports this conclusion. Pericles' influence derives from *axioma*, which conveys personal prestige—that is, a reputation for worthiness that is reflected in one's rank in society.⁶⁴ This word shows that is not virtue or innate excellence, but established status that accounts for his influence.

⁶² Fisher notes this omission as well as the implication that "the people did not so much learn from Periclean speech as they were affected by it." Fisher insists, however, that "In the presence of Pericles...everything worked as Pericles suggested it should," *Heroic Democracy: Thucydides, Pericles, and the Tragic Science of Athenian Greatness* (Ph.D. diss., Berkley, 2017), 94. But I see the differences between Thucydides assessment and Pericles self-assessment as indicating that, to a degree, Pericles misdiagnoses the basis of his own authority. Thus, rather than celebrating Pericles' autocratic rule as the "keystone of democratic greatness" (95), Thucydides is offering a cautionary tale of the costs that the pursuit of greatness impose on a democracy.

⁶³ "...readers are led to suppose that on the most important public matters, the judgment of Athenian audiences amounted to approval of proposals that were patently trustworthy because they emanated from a man in whom the Athenians rightly placed their full confidence..." Ober, "Thucydides and the Invention of Political Science," in *Brill's Companion to Thucydides* (Leiden: Brill, 2006), 152.

⁶⁴ Thucydides' decision to use the neuter form ἀξίωμα, rather than the feminine ἀξίωσις or the masculine adjective ἄξιος, (both of which he uses to describe Themistocles at I.138), emphasizes

It is often claimed that Pericles was a unique talent in oratory, able to sway the Assembly in large part through unparalleled eloquence.⁶⁵ This supposed eloquence comes to us most prominently through Plutarch's depiction of Pericles. While Plutarch celebrates the "dreadful thunderbolt in his tongue," there is no similar pronouncement by Thucydides.⁶⁶ The closest is when Thucydides introduces Pericles as "most effective in speech and in action."⁶⁷ This leaves open whether Pericles is eloquent or simply empowered through the results of his speeches. It also contrasts tellingly with Thucydides' effusive praise of Themistocles in the prior paragraph as a leader who worthy of "marvel" not only because of his ability to make good judgments but because he "had the power of explaining them" (I.138.3).⁶⁸ Hornblower argues that Thucydides intends to form a "natural bridge" from Themistocles to Pericles, but fails to note the distinction between Pericles' self-description and Thucydides' authorial assessment.⁶⁹ That Pericles presents himself as possessing Themistocles' virtues does not prove the point. Appreciation of the famous funeral oration in its English translation obscures the fact that the Greek is awkward and difficult to follow, and certainly not bewitching in its cadences. In contrast with Plutarch's depiction of Pericles, Thucydides' Pericles carries the day not so much because of his masterful oratory as because of his personal reputation. Edmunds and Martin once argued for Pericles'

the objects by which honor is conveyed. It might be (over)translated as "the trappings of status." The word choice strengthens the sense that Pericles' personal prestige explains his influence, not that his influence reveals his worthiness, as some translations might imply.

⁶⁵ Vincent Azoulay states that Pericles was "the incarnation, par excellence, of an orator endowed with a power of rhetoric that combined both authority and pedagogy." Cited in Perry, who himself claims that "Thucydides emphasizes Pericles' exceptional talent as an orator." "Pericles as 'Man of Athens'," 248.

⁶⁶ "Pericles" in *Plutarch's Lives*, ed. Arthur Hough Clough, trans. John Dryden (New York: Modern Library, 1992), 207.

⁶⁷ λέγειν τε καὶ πράσσειν δυνατώτατος

⁶⁸ ἐξηγήσασθαι οἷός τε...

⁶⁹ Hornblower, *Commentary*, ad loc.

persuasiveness as the thrust of the encomium by posing the rhetorical question: “Unless one believes that Pericles cowed the people merely by his stern appearance and the gravity of his manner, how can he have maintained his power over them except through his oratory in the assembly?”⁷⁰ Edmunds and Martin claim that since persuasiveness is the only logical way to understand influence in the context of a democracy, Pericles “freely” controlling the majority is describing his exceptional persuasiveness. But influence is not simply reducible to convincing words. It may have been precisely that Pericles stern appearance and personal prestige did most of the work before he even opened his mouth.

In controlling the Assembly by dint of his reputation, Pericles prevents the people from exercising their judgment and turns the people into passive spectators of their own democracy. Pericles simply substituted his judgment for the people’s judgment on the basis of moral authority, and that was the end of the matter.⁷¹ His mode of controlling the Assembly was, essentially, unpersuasive.⁷² At best, this mode of influence simply presents the people with a *fait accompli* and allows leaders to proceed without having the bother of educating them.⁷³ At worst, it functions as corrosive flattery that infantilizes the audience. The notion that democracy is so easy—that the people can practice decision-making without exercising their own judgment or engaging in vigorous debate—is itself a form of demagogic flattery.

⁷⁰ Edmunds and Martin, “Thucydides 2.65.8,” 191.

⁷¹ Farrar uses the expression of substituting judgment, but takes an entirely sanguine view of its effects on the people, who, in her view, “need to be led.” 189-190.

⁷² Contra Perry, who frames Pericles’ rule by reputation as complementing his exceptional eloquence: “Thucydides believed that in the case of Pericles it was not merely rhetorical skills that swayed the assembly but rather people’s faith in Pericles on the basis of his record.” 257.

⁷³ Contra Ober: “Rather than infantilizing the audience, Thucydides suggests, Periclean speeches and proposals helped citizens gain a better (if inevitably only partial) understanding of how the overall system worked.” “Thucydides and the Invention of Political Science,” 152.

Pericles' Unhealthy Responsiveness

Pericles' ability to counteract the people and his willingness to do so are central to laudatory assessments of his rule. The shared assumption of such assessments is that Pericles' counteracting the people moderates and improves them.⁷⁴ But I would argue that Pericles harms the people through his responsiveness to their moods. If we return to the passage and look at Pericles' version of popular responsiveness, we note that it is entirely negative. He does not take seriously their wishes. Rather, he manages their mood swings:

...he was able to speak not for their pleasure, but even to contradict them despite their anger. Whenever, then, he perceived that from *hubris* they were confident beyond due measure, he spoke and brought them down to fearfulness; and whenever they were unreasonably fearful he brought them back up again to courageousness (II.65.9).

In addition to noting that Pericles manages the people without a responsiveness to the substance of their concerns, his management serves to maintain the status quo rather than allow change. Pericles' ability to adjust the thermostat of public feeling is only ever shown to be in the service of preventing reconsideration of important issues. Just as we saw above, staying the course is a Periclean mainstay.

We see such a dynamic at work in his final speech. Faced with a popular movement for peace after the disastrous plague and widespread suffering, Pericles combines self-praise and denigration of their concerns to quash dissatisfaction with the war effort. He speaks to them not

⁷⁴ Farrar, *Origins*, 158-165; Fisher, *Heroic Democracy*, 117; Yunis, *Taming Democracy*, 33; Tsakmakis summarizes this reading: "Through instruction and reasoning, Pericles tries to discourage unwelcome mass action, and to transform a crowd into a totality of responsible individuals." "Leaders, Crowds, and the Power of the Image: Political Communication in Thucydides," 168.

to reconsider the merits of policy, but to “draw the sting of their anger and so restore them to a calmer and more confident frame of mind” (II.59.3).⁷⁵ Pericles’ strategy of persuasion is to shame his audience into behaving, and after some resistance they fall in line because they believe that he is “the worthiest for what the city as a whole needed” (II.65.3). He carries the day and prevents change not because the argument for his policy was persuasive, but because of who he is.

Although Pericles makes the execution of foreign policy more consistent, his manipulation of public emotion should be read as foreclosing democratic deliberation and negating the distinctive democratic strength of constant rethinking. While Pericles’ ability to counter popular moods may have been less harmful than his successors’ pandering to the people’s pleasure, insofar as it forecloses reconsideration it is nonetheless a subversion of the proper place of open-ended deliberation at the center of democratic politics.

More broadly, I would suggest that Pericles’ deft responsiveness to popular moods, combined with his disregard for substantive reconsideration, reframes leadership as managing popular temper tantrums. Thoughtful judgment is foreclosed while emotional outbursts are acknowledged. The Assembly is not as a serious forum for discussion and civic engagement, but a place where people should expect their feelings to be addressed but their thoughts ignored. Pericles’ responsiveness to popular mood swings, and his willingness to contrive such mood swings to serve his purposes, can be analogized to bad parenting, when a child’s tantrums are acknowledged but good behavior is ignored. In such cases we should blame the parent more than the child. Or we could return to our analogy of gutter guards in bowling: the more one learns to

⁷⁵ Thucydides, *War of the Peloponnesians and the Athenians*, trans. Jeremy Mynott (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2013).

score by deflecting off of the guardrails, the farther one is from knowing how to bowl unassisted. Thus, while it is possible that Pericles' style is effective in the short term, it also stands to reason that it contributed to the long-term unruliness of the *demos*. There is no instructional benefit for the *demos* as a consequence of being managed without being listened to.

The passage that precedes Thucydides' encomium of Pericles provides evidence for precisely such an unhealthy influence. Thucydides writes:

And indeed, the entirety of the population did not stop being angry with him until they had fined him some money. But not much later, as is usual for the crowd, they chose him as general again and turned over all their affairs to him, since they were now more inured with respect to the suffering which each felt for his private property, while they believed him to be the worthiest for what the city as a whole needed (II.65.3).

The people briefly try to object to his control when they issue him a fine, but they are so dependent on Pericles that they follow their censure by re-electing him. The combination of censure and re-election makes the people look petulant and spoiled, and leads the reader to some level of sympathy for Pericles, even as we can begin to understand how he might be somewhat responsible for his situation. Scholars often look to these moments for proof that Thucydides despises the "crowd," as such, but we should be careful to note the specific context of this behavior in reaction to a kind of leadership that was stifling and infantilizing—Thucydides seems rather to dislike this exceptionally spoiled crowd.⁷⁶

⁷⁶ Romilly argues that the people are dependent on Pericles as a force of reason to control them, but does not explore the further possibility that it might have deleterious consequences on the self-understanding of the people to have a leader exercise the kind of control over the people that reason exercises over the passions. "L'Optimisme de Thucydide et son Jugement sur Périclès (Thucydides, II.65)" *Revue des Études Grecques* 78, no. 371/373 (Juillet-Décembre, 1965): 566. Cf. Foster, who notes that this action serves to "demonstrate the People's swiftly changing moods and dependence on Pericles." *Thucydides, Pericles and Periclean Imperialism*, 213. Virginia Hunter reads this passage for evidence of a general Thucydidean disdain for the "volatility of the masses." "Thucydides and the Sociology of the Crowd," 21.

Pericles rules by way of a cocktail of unhealthy leadership in this reading. He is too dominating to allow for a flourishing deliberative culture and substantive debate, and to the extent he is responsive, he treats popular objections as mood swings to be managed rather than taken seriously. Both of these attributes stand in the way of the maturation of popular judgment. Whatever constraints Pericles imposes on the *demos* clearly do not teach them self-restraint—if anything it seems the opposite. The proof for this is in the behavior of the Assembly after Pericles’ death. As we will see below, the Assembly displays an immaturity of judgment—neither acting with appropriate gravity nor adequately considering the consequences of their actions at key moments. More immediately, we see in Diodotus’ response to Cleon that even those figures who oppose populist demagogues are forced to use flattering and specious reasoning in order to contend with the rhetoric of demagoguery.

After Pericles: The Politics of Personality

In the Mytilene Debate, we see a deliberative environment in which the Periclean value of personal reputation is the primary consideration, and substantive debate is replaced by *ad hominem* denigration of an opponent’s character. While it is unavoidable that issues of reputation and trustworthiness will (and no doubt should) influence the selection of leaders in a democracy, Thucydides’ critique is of an extreme manifestation of the “reputation mechanism” on which elitist or representative democracy depends in order to differentiate good leaders from bad.⁷⁷ In the wake of an extremely reputable leader such as Pericles, this mechanism is distorted, such that advice matters less than the identity of the speaker. We should read this debate’s shortcomings as

⁷⁷ “The prosperity of elitist democracy...depends on the success of the reputation mechanism to promote worthy individuals.” Perry, “Pericles as a ‘Man of Athens’,” 260.

the consequence of Pericles' rule. It is not simply the absence but the aftermath of Pericles that we are witnessing.

In opposition to the anti-deliberative demagoguery of Cleon, Thucydides gives us the speech of the otherwise unknown Diodotus. Diodotus articulates a dispassionate and measured vision of public deliberation (III.44.), and sees his role as an adviser guiding the people in their deliberation rather than foreclosing deliberation altogether, as Cleon would prefer.⁷⁸ Like Archidamus, who defends deliberation before the Spartans, Diodotus comes off better than his opponent, indicating a general preference on Thucydides' part for speakers who respect the capacity of their audience to understand details of policy and refrain from denigrating continual reconsideration.⁷⁹

The victory of Diodotus in the Mytilene Debate, and the merciful repeal of the brutal initial sentence provides a plausible basis for reading Diodotus as the closest approximation of an ideal democratic leader to be found in Thucydides' work.⁸⁰ His victory comes in the context of a

⁷⁸ Like Archidamus (I.84.3) and Hermocrates (IV.59.5, IV.62.1), Diodotus defends “*euboulia*,” literally good deliberation.

⁷⁹ Saxonhouse reads Diodotus as the “true democratic theorist from antiquity,” whose defense of the Mytileneans on the basis of a pluralistic understanding of responsibility implies a critique of Periclean uniformity and a commitment to procedures that guarantee against the conformity of certainty. *Athenian Democracy*, 75, 78.

⁸⁰ Saxonhouse reads the debate constructively as an example of “how communal decision-making among different self-interested individuals may lead to better policy outcomes, even if it means that the assembly (and the people within it) change their minds, an eventuality that Pericles, encouraging steadfastness, discourages.” *Athenian Democracy*, 72. This is an underappreciated aspect of the Debate. More commonly its discord is contrasted unfavorably with Pericles' enlightened and unifying rule. See Nicole Loraux, *The Invention of Athens: The Funeral Oration in the Classical City*. trans. Alan Sheridan (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1986), 294. Another common approach is to contrast the Mytilene Debate with the Spartans' brutal show trial at the Plataean episode and take it as an implicit celebration of Athens' fairmindedness in contrast with Sparta. Connor, *Thucydides*, 91. Cf. Geoffrey Hawthorn, *Thucydides on Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 92.

genuine debate and emerges from a real multiplicity of viewpoints, in contrast with Pericles' domination. Facilitating such a laudable outcome in the face of such challenges surely deserves some respect. However, if we put aside our (likely) approbation of the final decision, and instead focus on the process by which the decision is reached, the deficiencies of the deliberative process become clear.⁸¹

Before Diodotus speaks, Cleon denigrates Diodotus' motivations and character by implying that he must have taken bribes from the Mytileneans (III.38.2). In deploying this *ad hominem*, Cleon makes the issue of trustworthiness or reputation central to the debate: the content of Diodotus' arguments are to be ignored—all that matters are his motivations. In the aftermath of Pericles' rhetoric of and rule by personal prestige, these values have an outsize influence. The negative side of Pericles' over-emphasis on his reputation is Cleon's deployment of *ad hominem* attacks in place of substantive disagreement.

The Speech of Diodotus

Diodotus' speech begins with a pointed diagnosis of the inadequacies of the Athenian practice of deliberation. Scholars often see the merciful Diodotus as continuing the moderation of Periclean politics.⁸² But he is better understood as a critic of Pericles' politics of personality and a

⁸¹ In my reading of the Mytilene Debate I am largely in agreement with the assessments of Ober, who reads it as little more than “convoluted meta-rhetorical arguments” and T.J. Perry, who sees it as a decision “made by a faulty mechanism and for the wrong reasons.” Ober, “Thucydides Theoretikos/Thucydides History: Realist Theory and the Challenge of History,” in *War and Democracy: A Comparative Study of the Korean War and the Peloponnesian War*, ed. David R. McCann and Barry S. Strauss (Armonk: M.E. Sharpe, 2000), 296. Perry, “Pericles as a ‘Man of Athens’,” 243.

⁸² Donald Kagan, *The Archidamian War* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1974), 162; John Finley argues that Diodotus “reaffirms the Periclean notion that intellect and practical policy can coexist” and sees Diodotus as a covertly reasonable leader in the way that Pericles was overtly.

proponent of a more modest notion of democratic leadership as giving advice rather than dominating through personal reputation. Diodotus explicitly highlights the unhealthy consequences of the leadership by personal reputation that Pericles practices, since personal motivations are now more important than quality of argument. In Diodotus' telling, the people are so taken with the personal motivations of the speakers that they cannot judge an argument on its merits. They allow claims and accusations about trustworthiness to stand in for substantive discussion (III.43). The people are reflexively distrustful of speakers who have not established their credibility on the basis of their personal reputation. This over-emphasis on personal trustworthiness paradoxically elevates less trustworthy advisers, as speakers must lie about their motivations in order to exaggerate their trustworthy standing.⁸³ The quality of the advice drops when the trustworthy character of the speaker is the primary consideration, and the people can substitute trust in a leader for substantive engagement with policy.

Thucydides, 85, 88. A. Andrewes sees Diodotus as “defending the doctrine of the Funeral Oration” from Cleon, “The Mytilene Debate: Thucydides 3.36-49,” *Phoenix* 16, no. 2 (Summer 1962), 75. Cf. Leo Strauss, *The City and Man*, 231. Colin Macleod, “Reason and Necessity,” in *Collected Essays*, (Oxford: Clarendon, 1983), 73.

⁸³ It is often noted that Diodotus' statement of the need for dishonesty is a paradoxical announcement, as it seems to implicate himself as well. Andrewes, 74. Paula A. Debnar takes it not as a statement of intention so much as a provocation intended to stimulate his audience to critical engagement by appealing to their competitive spirit. “Diodotus' Paradox and the Mytilene Debate (Thucydides 3.37-49),” *Rheinisches Museum für Philologie* Neue Folge 143. Bd. H. 2 (2000): 171. Clifford Orwin reads it as signaling that his speech will have a deeper layer of claims to justice that masquerade as claims to self-interest. *The Humanity of Thucydides* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994), 154. Cf. Strauss, *City and Man*, 254. Gerald Mara, “Thucydides and Political Thought,” 117; “Thucydides and the Problem of Citizenship,” 320. Saxonhouse, *Free Speech and Democracy in Ancient Athens* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 160. Without denying that Diodotus' speech can stimulate a deeper understanding on the intersection of justice, self-interest, and necessity, I think such readings can let the Athenian audience off too easily for rewarding superficiality in their speakers.

In place of this way of judging their speakers, Diodotus favors judging advice on the substance of the words spoken in debate: “It is necessary for a good citizen to be manifestly superior to his opponent on the basis of speaking in an equal setting, not on the basis of intimidating his opponents” (III.42.5). This seems an accurate diagnosis and a laudable goal for public discourse (even though he fails to offer any concrete suggestions as to how this could be achieved).⁸⁴ But, since the Athenians fail to judge speakers on such a basis, Diodotus is forced to engage in precisely the deceptive and specious rhetoric that he decries when he defends the Mytileneans against Cleon. In an environment where demagogic rhetoric has such purchase, he has no other choice.

Diodotus’ defense of the Mytileneans is more flattery than serious reasoning about foreign policy. It is a dramatically inadequate piece of reasoning on the questions of responsibility and morality in foreign policy. He argues in the same breath that deterrence is ineffective (III.45) and that excessive harshness might deter potential allies (III.47.5). He misrepresents the sequence of events at Mytilene to credit the *demos* with handing over the city, when the reader knows that it was in fact the oligarchs and not the democratic element that surrendered the city (III.27.3).⁸⁵ He first invokes a theory of human nature such that no one can be blamed for rebelling, but by the end of the speech he shifts to comfortably blaming the oligarchs for rebelling in order to excuse the *demos* (III.47.1-2). Despite Cleon’s status as the demagogue, Diodotus’ speech is the more flattering one.⁸⁶ Diodotus gives the Athenians the easy

⁸⁴ Landauer notes that Diodotus offers “no clear path forward.” *Dangerous Counsel*, 122. Cf. Ober, *Dissent*, 103.

⁸⁵ Connor, *Thucydides*, 88.

⁸⁶ As Connor notes, the only way to beat Cleon is to “out-Cleon” him. *New Politicians*, 182. This is also evident throughout the plot of Aristophanes’ *Knights*.

way out. Clearly the Athenians are troubled by the harshness that is required to maintain a tyrannical empire, so Diodotus soothingly reassures them that they can have a tyrannical empire without the unpleasantness of getting their hands dirty. He promotes a doctrine in which the *demos* is not responsible for the deeds of a city—a message that may resonate well with an audience perhaps uncomfortable with taking responsibility for its own foreign policy. In a similar vein, Diodotus argues that the Mytilenean revolt was motivated by the most basic elements of human nature—everyone desires what Diodotus calls “the greatest things...freedom or ruling over others (III.45.6).⁸⁷ If the same impulses unite the Athenians and the Mytileneans, and these impulses are forgivable, then it follows that forgiveness of the Mytileneans is also forgiveness of themselves.

Diodotus is far from an ideal leader in this reading, in that he deploys the dishonest and specious flattery that he claims to deplore.⁸⁸ It is possible to excuse this to some extent by arguing that Cleon has established the terms of the debate and Diodotus has no other options. But if such rhetoric and inadequate reasoning is necessary in order to carry the day in the Assembly, then the implication is that the Assembly is functioning poorly. The point is not that all democratic deliberation necessarily requires flattery and is torn apart by the competition for honor and the problem of trust, but that the Athenians in this particular moment are displaying poor habits.⁸⁹ The quality of debate has been corrupted, as we have seen, by the substitution of claims about trust over substantive argumentation, and the more flattering speech carries the day.

⁸⁷ περὶ τῶν μεγίστων τε, ἐλευθερίας ἢ ἄλλων ἀρχῆς. Mynott’s translation takes this passage as “the stakes are highest—freedom versus the rule of others,” but I do not see this kind of contrast in the Greek, nor would that be a typical use of the genitive. *War of the Peloponnesians*, ad loc.

⁸⁸ Macleod, “Reason and Necessity,” 77.

⁸⁹ Clifford Orwin argues that the need for speakers to compete for the affirmation of the people inherently breeds distrust and highlights the disjunction between successful persuasive abilities

Through the Mytilene episode Thucydides shows that the Athenian audience is not treating the Assembly as a place where they reach decisions as a result of a serious consideration of the best policy. They are not adequately engaged in the hard work of listening to argumentation and consideration of the future implications of their decisions. In short, there is a certain immaturity in their discourse.

The narrative surrounding the Mytilene Debate supports such a reading of dysfunctional public deliberation. First, Thucydides implies that neither speaker had a decisive effect on the outcome, as the opinion of the audience is the same at the end of the debate as at the beginning (III.49.1).⁹⁰ This leads us to wonder if any of these arguments were being listened to with appropriate open-mindedness, or if the audience is gathering not so much to reason about alternative policies as to find a pleasing excuse to do what they have already decided they want to do.⁹¹ Then, the episode ends with the Athenians, on Cleon's bidding, killing a thousand Mytileneans who were somehow associated with the revolt. In killing the thousand, the Athenians indulge in an act of revenge that extends far beyond punishing what we might think of as the ringleaders of the rebellion (III.50). It is a significant percentage of the total number of citizens. When we read the speeches in the context of the actions that precede and follow it, we

and true knowledge, along the lines of Socrates' critique of rhetoric in the *Gorgias* and in Book VI of the *Republic*, "Democracy and Distrust," in *Thucydides' Theory of International Relations*, ed. Lowell S. Gustafson (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2000). While Thucydides does not spell out what the better politics would look like, I would contend that he still allows for differentiation between better and worse deliberation depending on the character of the audience, so Diodotus' diagnosis is not simply pessimistic or "spurious." Orwin, *The Humanity of Thucydides*, 159.

⁹⁰ Thucydides notes that debate is re-opened in the first place because only because it is clear that "the majority of the citizens" (τὸ πλεόν τῶν πολιτῶν) already want an opportunity to reconsider (III.36.5).

⁹¹ Simon Hornblower notes that Thucydides "manages to convey the suggestion that the eventual decision was taken without reference to the speeches made." *Commentary*, 1:433.

arrive at a much less sanguine view of their public reasoning than we would if we looked at the speeches in isolation. The Athenians avoid difficult choices, indulging in their revenge while simultaneously allowing themselves to feel merciful and forgiving.

It should be emphasized that Thucydides conveys relief that the Mytileneans are spared. Even if the members of the Assembly are not deliberating with the rigor that they should, their change of course is laudable. The second trireme rows all night in order to intercept the first one and arrives at the very moment when the death penalty is being read out, while the first ship's crew rows slowly under the burden of their "unwelcome business" (III.49.4). The dramatic sequence of events conveys an undeniable sense of relief that the deaths were avoided. The decision to change their minds and repent of executing the Mytileneans marks a moment when the Athenians pause and cast doubt on the Periclean vision of their city. They shy away from executing the Mytileneans because it is a "great" but terrible thing to do. Greatness is precisely the value that Pericles celebrates, greatness such as will leave monuments "for good or bad things" (II.41.1). The Athenians blanch at the monstrosity that greatness requires. Their willingness to change their minds is at odds with a speaker who celebrated and preached constancy and characterized changing course as weakness of will. Thucydides does not directly condemn the audience for the speakers' inadequacy. He allows the reader to wonder if they are at some level dissatisfied with their options.

It is clear, then, that while the Athenians are to be commended for their willingness to reconsider their decision and for their final verdict, Thucydides invites the thought that they are not exercising their judgment as rigorously as they should be. There is a disappointing lack of rigor in how they avoid the hard choices, and the Assembly space is not so much a place where minds are changed as where pre-determined change is ratified. But this is exactly what one

would expect in the aftermath of a leader who substitutes his own judgment for the people's. Pericles usurped the people's role and substituted his judgment for theirs, and thus prevented the people from exercising their judgment. He also convinces them that personal trustworthiness is all they need to judge in their advisers. The troubling content of the Mytilene Debate, the demagogic focus on *ad hominem* accusations about trustworthiness in place of substantive discussion, the unrigorous judgment that the people display in both sparing the Mytileneans and condemning so many of them, and the possibility that none of the arguments make a difference—all these characteristics bear the imprint of Pericles' influence.

Deliberative Challenges beyond the Mytilenean Debate

Throughout the remainder of the history, the Athenian people continue to make poor decisions and fail to understand the consequential nature of their decisions. But after being so deftly coddled by Pericles, what else would we expect? They do not mature into the role of responsible rulers because Pericles had so successfully usurped that role. Without the opportunity to exercise their judgment properly as rulers, they cannot be blamed for failing to develop the prudence required for rule.

A low point in democratic decision-making is when they select Cleon as general during the Pylos episode (IV.27-28). The Athenians recognize Cleon to be incompetent, and famously burst out laughing when he claims he can achieve victory easily, but they nonetheless elect him general, entrusting the fate of a major military operation to a laughingstock. Their misplaced emphasis on the personal integrity and motivations of their leaders is also on full display during the Sicilian Expedition. The Sicilian Debate—the most disastrous moment of decision-making in the history—is characterized to a remarkable degree by slanderous personal attacks between

Nicias (VI.12.2) and Alcibiades (VI.16.2, 18.6).⁹² Some of these attacks seem to have a lasting effect. The Athenians famously recall Alcibiades from his generalship because of their fear—based on his personal lifestyle—that he secretly aspired to tyranny (VI.15).⁹³ Thucydides indicates that his absence from the expedition may well have cost Athens the war, but such is their obsession with personal integrity that the Athenians cannot tolerate his unsavory character even during a military campaign. They place too much weight on trustworthiness, and this ruins them.⁹⁴

All this leaves the reader wondering what exactly good democratic leadership looks like for Thucydides. I would suggest that Thucydides prefers speakers such as Diodotus, who gives advice to the people without dominating them and thereby usurping the *demos*' role as ruler, and without relying on a pre-established reputation to substitute for a convincing speech. To the extent that Diodotus' advice is disingenuous and flattering, this reflects the rhetorical constraints placed upon him by Cleon and the cultivated expectations of the audience before him. The policy that he advocates and his status as an adviser rather than a ruler gives us a superior model to Periclean domination or Cleonic demagoguery. Like Archidamus advising the Spartans (I.84.3) and Hermocrates advising the Sicilians (IV.59.5, IV.62.1), Diodotus defends the very idea of deliberating well (*euboulia*) (III.44.). He respects the premises of debate and the capacity of the

⁹² On Alcibiades' speech as a response to a slanderous attack, see especially Macleod, "Rhetoric and History," in *Collected Essays*, 70.

⁹³ Tellingly, Alcibiades' own rhetoric echoes Cleon's and Pericles' in his celebration of action (VI.18.6), in his urging constancy rather than change (VI.17.2.) and in his invocation of Athens as unified and homogenous compared to the divided multiplicity of their enemies (VI.17.2).

⁹⁴ Thucydides makes the unusually direct judgment that Alcibiades' ostentatious personality was "the very thing that was not the least responsible for destroying the city" since the people grew suspicious of his motivations and trusted other leaders (VI.15.3). Unfortunately, these alternative leaders turn out to be even less trustworthy.

assembled people to rule. Most importantly, such leaders persuade their audience by force of argument, rather than by appeals to personal reputation, and thereby promote a deliberative culture in which proposed policies are assessed on their merits rather than the reputation of the speaker.

Conclusion

In this chapter I have argued that Thucydides critiques the leadership of Pericles by linking him with his demagogic successors and showing a corrupting influence on the quality of democratic deliberation in Athens. Pericles' method of controlling the *demos* reflects a fallacious understanding that he is not so much an adviser as a ruler based on trustworthiness. But this mode of leadership contributes to his audience's immaturity of judgment, as he reacts to their moods without taking seriously (and even denigrating) their judgment. Pericles dominates the *demos* by dint of his personal reputation, supported by a vision of citizenship as unified and action-oriented, while stifling dissent and debate. For Pericles, the city is best when it acts as a unitary whole on the international stage rather than a forum for debate among differing citizens. In his wake, the demagogue Cleon echoes Pericles and takes on his mantle as a leader of personal constancy ridiculing popular judgment, while more conscientious leaders struggle to give advice under the cloud of suspicion about personal integrity. The demagogic afterlife of his words, the overemphasis on the reputation of speakers, and the immature judgment of the people after Pericles' death all point to the consequences of his usurping the *demos'* rule and substituting his own judgment for the people's. In contrast, the relatively laudable outcome of the Mytilene Debate shows the superiority of the democratic tendency to openminded reconsideration over the determined constancy of Pericles and the demagogues. Nonetheless, the

specious rhetoric of both Cleon and Diodotus in that debate shows that a laudable outcome is not indicative of a healthy deliberative culture. The aftereffects of Pericles' usurpation of popular rule leaves the people less than fully capable of self-rule, and less capable than they otherwise might have been. Thucydides is not giving us an anti-democratic polemic, then, but a depiction of the deleterious consequences of ruling a democracy as if it were a monarchy. Just like Socrates in Plato's *Gorgias*, Thucydides encourages us to look at the long-term effects of a leader on the virtues of the audience.⁹⁵

Thucydides' critique of Pericles speaks to contemporary concerns with the challenge of populism. If the central problem with populist movements is their tendency to place too much trust in autocratic figures, Thucydides prompts us to consider that even genuinely trustworthy leaders can contribute to this tendency inadvertently. We surely cannot avoid the problem of trust in a democracy, as every citizen cannot govern equally in all matters. But we should be wary of viewing trustworthiness as a replacement for, rather than a vehicle of, popular judgment. Placing trust in a leader cannot define the limit of democratic citizenship, while democratic leadership should guide and engage popular judgment rather than seek to replace it. Demagoguery thrives when trust replaces understanding. Particularly insofar as appeals to reputation serves as a replacement for substantive argument, and the merits of a policy matter less than the identity of the speaker who proposes it, reasonable deliberation becomes impossible and disagreement degenerates into personal attacks.

For contemporary theory, Thucydides thus speaks to the distinctively democratic—rather than liberal—basis of concern that some theorists have recently voiced in the face of populist

⁹⁵ *Gorgias*, 517b-c.

ideologies.⁹⁶ Thucydides' critique of Pericles as a proto-demagogue points to an ancient concern with precisely a contemporary democratic fear—that demagoguery, or what we usually call “populism,” draws on democratic language and uses democratic systems even as it undermines the foundations of democratic rule. The idea that a well-intentioned leader could pave the way for demagogic successors has, to my knowledge, been underexamined.

Thucydides' critique of Pericles thus has broad relevance to theorizing leadership and representation. Recent scholarship has shown that Athenian democracy was not as different from our own experience of representative government as the traditional emphasis on the small-scale directness of Athenian government might lead us to believe.⁹⁷ For an Athenian voter, participation involved listening—without the realistic opportunity to voice an opinion—to different proposals and then voting on them, as well as electing leaders to guide foreign policy. Although the language of representation did not yet exist, these leaders were, for all practical purposes, representatives. Understanding Pericles' failure as a failure of representation complements the recent efforts of Michael Saward to re-imagine representation as an activity of claim-making and claim-receiving that constitutes the identity of the represented people.⁹⁸ Pericles' failure can be taken as evidence of the inadequacy of his claims to authority, built as they are on the assumption that democracy can flourish when it abdicates popular judgment to a ruler who promises everything and concedes nothing.

⁹⁶ Nadia Urbinati, *Representative Democracy: Principles and Genealogy* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2006), 3, 16; *Democracy Disfigured* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2014), chap. 3.

⁹⁷ Daniela Cammack, “Deliberation in Ancient Greek Assemblies.”

⁹⁸ Michael Saward, *The Representative Claim*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010). Cf. Matt Simonton, “Representing the Demos: Adapting Insights from the Constructivist Turn in Political Representation,” *Ramus* 50, no.1-2 (December 2021): 129-144. Of course, Thucydides does not see the represented people as mere constructions.

Through Pericles and his legacy, Thucydides shows us the limitations and consequences of a statesman-centered vision of politics. The quality of democratic leadership is not commensurate with a willingness to defy popular pressure. As Melissa Lane has noted, such a vision is stifling for democratic theory: “There is no room here for any view of democratic politics which seeks to enable people to change in order to meet challenges for themselves, or to the statesman in turn to change, learning from the people’s ideas.”⁹⁹ Thucydides’ critique of Pericles is a critique of the idea that democracy is best when it is democracy in name only and that submission to a wise leader is the best posture for the people in a democracy. In place of the fallacy that the people should reduce their rule to placing trust in a statesman, Thucydides indicates that the key to healthy democratic politics lies with the genuine rule of the people considering public policy by way of pluralistic debate and with an openness to changing course.

⁹⁹ Lane, “Origins of the Statesman-Demagogue Distinction,” 199.

Chapter 2 The Second Fallacy: Reason Conquers All

Introduction

The second fallacy that I find in Athenian thinking about domestic and international affairs is the belief that reason conquers all. Throughout Thucydides' account of the Peloponnesian War, the Athenians exhibit a striking confidence in reason and a lack of concern for traditional or religious constraints on their actions. Their unrestrained self-confidence is antithetical to the emphasis on the unknowable and uncontrollable nature of events that we find from other sources such as Heraclitus or the tragedians.¹ It is also refuted by the narrative force of Thucydides' account, which emphasizes repeatedly the tendency for events to spiral out of control as well as the central role of chance in determining outcomes. But although the Athenian self-confidence is shown to be baseless, this is not evidence that Thucydides is implicitly a proponent of traditional piety. Rather, as this chapter will attempt to show, Thucydides critiques Athenian hubris from a rationalist—but humble—perspective.

Pericles, in Thucydides' depiction, understands the central political problem of motivating citizens towards public-spirited behavior, but he misunderstands how such motivation should be achieved. Pericles celebrates Athens' uniquely perfected civic practices (*nomoi*) and thus sees little use for prudent circumspection as an individual virtue. Rather, he celebrates the unrestrained lifestyle of the Athenians at home, just as he celebrates the unrestrained imperialism of Athens' empire abroad. Both domestically and abroad, the Athenians have a complete and

¹ Arlene W. Saxonhouse, "The Tyranny of Reason and the World of the Polis," *American Political Science Review* 82 no. 4 (1988): 1262.

unrestrained confidence in their rational competence to pursue their interests in such a way that chance is mitigated. This confidence in reason, articulated most clearly by Pericles, is shown in the narrative to lead to disaster both in military engagements and in social breakdown during the plague. This chapter thus attempts to revise recent scholarly readings of Thucydides by showing that his implicit critique of Pericles has a prudential, rather than traditionally pious, basis; it further seeks to show that Thucydides views rational self-interest, rather than the uncontrollable power of irrational passions, as the cause of the most destructive behavior, both at home and abroad. The language of rationalism that Thucydides gives the Athenians conveys hubris in the face of the unknown, and invites reversal through the contingencies that are always beyond human calculation.

Catastrophic behavior is not the result of passions or divine forces that overwhelm rational restraint, but of misguided reasoning, which in turn inflames the passions. The solution Thucydides points to is not a return to a more pious way of life or a withdrawal to philosophy but an improved awareness of how actors' quality of reasoning is influenced by their belief in their rational capacities. Healthy rational behavior does not require higher order restraints so much as a better understanding of inherent limitations of human judgment.² We can thus question the basic similarity between Thucydides and Hobbes that is often assumed by readers in the realist tradition. While Hobbes sees politics to be a science of restraining of irrational impulses through

² Thucydides' Athenians bear some similarities to the Oedipus of Sophocles' *Oedipus Tyrannus*, who can similarly be read as a cautionary tale of the dangers that unrestrained reason can pose to political life. As Saxonhouse puts it, Oedipus "believes that he relied on no one and nothing except his own mind" and in his downfall "incorporates the tension between the limits we must observe and the freedom of our intellect." "The Tyranny of Reason and the World of the Polis," *American Political Science Review* 82 no. 4 (1988): 1265, 1273.

fear-based calculations, and expresses great optimism that a perfectible social order can be achieved on such a scientific basis, Thucydides conveys a sense of the dangers of a Hobbesian optimism.³

By understanding that Pericles and the Athenians are susceptible to the seduction of reason rather than of incomprehensible passions or unforeseeable external events, I find an internal consistency in Thucydides' work and a commonality between his and Plato's perspectives on politics. I read Thucydides as a secular historian who thinks material factors key to understanding the success or failure of nations, even as he does not think quantifiable material superiority (such as the Athenians possessed) justifies the confidence that Pericles exhibits. Technological and material superiority, in Athens' case, feeds the overconfidence that leads to their destruction.⁴ Thucydides anticipates Plato in his criticism of Pericles' vision of politics, insofar as it is utopian and overly optimistic of the possibility of enlightened and sound decision-

³ On the relative optimism of Hobbes over Thucydides, see Peter J. Ahrensdorf, "The Fear of Death and the Longing for Immortality: Hobbes and Thucydides on Human Nature and the Problem of Anarchy," *American Political Science Review* 94, no. 3 (2000): 579-593. For an extended contrast between Thucydides and Hobbes, see Laurie Johnson-Bagby, *Thucydides, Hobbes, and the Interpretation of Realism* (Dekalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 1993).

⁴ Thucydides' Archaeology and the entire first book have been shown by Edith Foster to function not as a scientific opening salvo that sits at odds with the remainder of the work, but a cautionary tale of the dangers of overly simplistic and materialistic thinking—particularly the belief that power, once attained, tends to preserve itself rather than self-destruct, and that technological advancement equates with civilizational superiority. Thucydides does not describe the benefits of technological progress, but the unanticipated misfortunes that accompany such progress—that is, the pitfalls of material gain. Edith Foster, *Thucydides, Pericles, and Periclean Imperialism*. Contra Lisa Kallet, *Money and the Corrosion of Power in Thucydides* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001), who reads Thucydides as exempting Pericles and the rise of Athens' empire from critique.

making.⁵ Both reveal, through different methods and in different genres, the chasm between ideal and real politics, as well as the likely adverse consequences of attempting to bridge that chasm.

The following chapter is divided into four sections. I begin with a review of scholars who reads Thucydides on a spectrum from rationalist to tragedian. The second section examines Pericles and Thucydides on the role of chance and the power of human judgment in mitigating chance in order to show that Pericles and other Athenians exhibit an arrogant disregard of chance in foreign affairs, born of their misguided faith in their powers of reasoning. This detrimentally affects both their ability to make sound decisions about risky ventures (such as the Sicilian Expedition) and their ability to appeal to reason in persuading other cities (such as Melos and Camarina) to do as they wish. In the third part I shift to domestic politics and examine the problem of self-interest and the common good to show that Pericles' mode of thinking is overly optimistic once again: his characterization of Athens as a utopia shows a belief in the perfectibility of social life and the possibility of a rational transcendence of individual desires through public devotion. In the fourth and final part we look to Thucydides' subsequent depiction of plague and *stasis* to show the fragility of social life in the face of rational self-interest. Thucydides again focuses on the misapplication of reason as the origin of destructive behavior. Against Pericles' optimism that humans can use reason can overcome chance and contribute to utopia, Thucydides depicts overconfidence in reason as sources of poor decision-making abroad and social disintegration at home.

⁵ See Emily Greenwood, "Pericles' Utopia: A Reading of Thucydides and Plato," in *How to Do Things with History: New Approaches to Ancient Greece*, ed. Danielle Allen, Paul Christensen, and Paul Millett (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018), 55-80.

In referring to human reason I mean to focus on human judgment (*gnômê*) more than abstract reason, or logic (*logos*). But Pericles obscures the distinction between the two and speaks of Athenian judgment as if they could guarantee their desired outcomes, if only they are thorough enough in their logic. The Athenians seem to be unable to distinguish between what is in the almost limitless realm of *logos* and what is in the realm of human judgment.

Overview of the problem

The tragedians and the wisdom of Solon tell us that the traditional Greek thinking of the time emphasized the ungraspable complexity of the world and the limitations of what we mere humans can understand, much less control, in the face of chance, fate, or the gods.⁶ But for Pericles, there are no unknowable forces that limit human aspirations or lie beyond our planning. Most prominently, in the funeral oration Pericles articulates a way of thinking about human capacity that is antithetical to restraint or humility.⁷ What often gets lost in the readings that celebrate the democratic aspects of Pericles' funeral oration is that there is no commitment to collective restraint or to individual rights. The only commitment Pericles seems to have is to the unlimited expansion and glory of the Athenian empire.⁸ Pericles thus breaks with any

⁶ Taking the wisdom of Solon and the plight of Sophocles' Oedipus to speak to a characteristically Greek way of looking at things, see Lowell Edmunds, *Chance and Intelligence in Thucydides*, 17, 75.

⁷ James Boyd White notes that Pericles' worldview "contains no principles of limitation..." *When Words Lose Their Meaning*, 74. Cf. S. Sara Monoson and Michael Loriaux who note that Pericles' focus on total devotion to the city runs counter to and undermines the traditional notion of reciprocity between the city and the citizen. "The Illusion of Power and the Disruption of Social Norms: Thucydides Critique of Periclean Policy," 287-8.

⁸ Loren J. Samons II, "Pericles and Athens," in *The Cambridge Companion to the Age of Pericles*, ed. Loren J Samons II (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 291.

“traditional” Greek understanding of human limitations or of a higher-than-human standard of glory. It is precisely the limitlessness of Pericles’ vision that this chapter will explore as the feature that links Pericles’ foreign policy with his domestic policy, and which explains his legacy of failures.

In contrast with Pericles’ confident rationalism, Thucydides’ narrative emphasizes the price of Athenian hubris and the power of chance.⁹ He thus takes fairly traditional values that we might recognize from tragedy, but presents them as a reasoned or even scientific truth.¹⁰ While Pericles extends a rationalistic, secular, and amoral perspective to politics, acknowledging no limitations or adverse consequences to his utopian goals, Thucydides implies that the most rational position is to be cognizant above all of reason’s limitations, and of the consequences of ignoring such limitations. This chapter builds on the insights of Josiah Ober and Tomer Perry, who read Thucydides as a forebear of modern behavioral economics.¹¹ In their analysis, the lesson that Thucydides alerts us to is that actors weigh risk and gain unreasonably, just as modern prospect theory shows. Poor decisions result from systematic miscalculation of risk or reward (and of other actors’ perception of risk or reward) rather than the inexplicable blindness

⁹ Edmunds, *Chance and Intelligence*, 56. If we take Thucydides and Pericles to diverge in their basic outlook, we can take his tragic outlook to be internally consistent and avoid the awkwardness of analyses such as that of Adam Parry, who argues that Thucydides started his career as an admirer Pericles but changed his mind once the war finished. “Thucydides’ Historical Method,” 49-51. Cf. John Finley, who argues for three stages of Thucydides development from conservative aristocrat to democrat and back to conservative. *Thucydides*, 32.

¹⁰ On the idea that Thucydides is transposing traditional values, see Richard Ned Lebow, “Thucydides the Constructivist,” 556. Gregory Crane, *Thucydides and the Ancient Simplicity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998). Cf. Mark Fisher, who sees a “synthesis” of tragic and scientific thinking. “Thucydides’s Tragic Science of Democratic Defeat,” 53.

¹¹ Josiah Ober and Tomer J. Perry, “Thucydides as Prospect Theorist,” *Polis* 31 (2014): 206-232.

of passion.¹² For Ober and Perry, though, the basis of such miscalculation is itself the result simply of a failure to weigh probability correctly. Given better information and an awareness of the human tendency to calculate risk incorrectly, Thucydides, in this reading, shows how this tendency can be countered by anyone in any situation. My reading, by contrast, is more specific to the Athenians, as I see their mode of thinking as distinctive in its excessive confidence. It is not quite correct then, to say that humans simply are irrational when it comes to weighing risk; rather, their beliefs about their own powers of reasoning will decisively contribute to the soundness of their decisions. Thucydides thus does not, in my view, point to so simple a solution as Ober and Perry indicate—namely that with a more systematic understanding of behavioral economics we can account for irrational biases. Rather, he shows how localized beliefs about reason itself drive irrational behavior. Conversely, he implies that proper reasoning requires the use of second-order reasoning on the subject of reasoning itself.¹³

Critiquing Pericles' mode of reasoning is nothing new. The contribution of this chapter will be to locate that critique in a rationalist perspective. While readings that locate a criticism of Pericles in Thucydides tend to find a conservative message therein, it is difficult to square Thucydides' innovative scientific method and his disregard of traditional explanations for events with such a finding. A rationalist reading allows for a coherent reading of Thucydides' project

¹² Thus they push back—correctly, in my view—on much recent scholarship that attributes to Thucydides a simply pessimistic or hopeless view of human planning. See especially Hans-Peter Stahl, “Herodotus and Thucydides on Blind Decisions Preceding Military Action.”

¹³ Thus while Ober and Perry correctly emphasize that miscalculation is central, they miss the more capacious implications of this observation when they assume that the solution is simply more information with which to calculate our first-order assumptions. Another way of putting this might be that it is a mistake to cast emotions (such as fear and hope) as the problem to be solved by improved reasoning, since reasoning itself contributes to such emotions when it is not restrained by an understanding of its own limitations.

and methodology, while also satisfactorily accounting for the implicit critique of Pericles' confidence in human reason that runs through the work.

There are, to paint with a broad brush, two basic approaches to understanding Thucydides' rationalism. Long the most prominent was that Thucydides is himself a confident rationalist and a representative of the new scientific reasoning of the Greek enlightenment. Jacqueline De Romilly re-established this reading of Thucydides as not so much an empiricist as a rationalist who understands events to have meaning entirely through their relation to human reasoning.¹⁴ De Romilly took the *Archaeology* to be the prototypical Thucydidean work of history, a "rationalist manifesto" that uses principles of reason to explain the course of human history without reference to specific events: "reasoning seemed to him competent not only to organize the factual data, but also to bring them to life and to supply, even in their absence, both the fabric and the very substance of history."¹⁵

As several subsequent scholars have noted, De Romilly's approach to Thucydides is highly selective and overly committed to Thucydides' optimism about human reason. For example, one of her favored examples is the battle of Naupactus, where the events of the battle fall neatly into place in line with the speeches of the leaders beforehand laying out the possible courses of events. De Romilly sees this as evidence of the "triumph of reason" and a defense of

¹⁴ "Nothing happens [in Thucydides' account] that is not either a confirmation or a refutation of the calculations worked out by reason; nothing appears that is not an adaptation, that is not a concept, nothing that has not been given its shape and foundation by the mind." Romilly, *The Mind of Thucydides*, ed. Hunter R. Rawlings III and Jeffrey Rusten, trans. Elizabeth Trapnell Rawlings (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2012), 94. Cf. Ronald Syme, "Thucydides," *Proceedings of the British Academy: 1962* (London: Oxford University Press, 1963), for the conventional "scientific" Thucydides.

¹⁵ Romilly, *Mind of Thucydides*, 151, 6.

the “art of foresight”: the winning side had the leader with greater foresight and understanding.¹⁶ De Romilly assumes that Thucydides believes that there is such an “art of foresight” by looking at a particularly straightforward example. But it is simply not the case that the outcomes are determined by the leader with the greater foresight, or that those leaders who most obviously seek to exercise foresight are linked with greater success. Pericles is singled out for his foresight (*pronoia*, II.65.6), while the Spartans are not, and yet the war does not go as Pericles’ anticipates, nor is the reader generally aware of all possible outcomes according to a rational schema. Rather than an account of the determinism of events according to reason, Thucydides gives us an account lacking in any such simplicity or predictability.

The alternative strain of reading Thucydides’ on the role of reason, articulated with great subtlety by Hans-Peter Stahl, is that Thucydides believes that not only is the course of events unpredictable and uncontrollable, but human behavior is driven by passions that entirely defy reason.¹⁷ Such readings have their own set of weaknesses. In Stahl’s case, there is little room for productive political lessons beyond the law of unintended consequences. By assigning to Thucydides an understanding of the world as unknowable, Stahl goes to the other extreme from de Romilly. Stahl’s pessimistic reading assigns poor decision-making to a complete lack of reason by human agents. But if we look at the poorly made decisions in Thucydides, there is always a rationale that is discernible to all parties. Even in the most extreme moments of social breakdown during the plague in Athens or the *stasis* in Corcyra, we see human behavior is not devoid of reason. Indeed, the severity of these social breakdowns is driven, at least in part, by the

¹⁶ Romilly, *Mind of Thucydides*, 103.

¹⁷ Hans-Peter Stahl, *Thucydides: Man’s Place in History*, 10, 143-152.

calculated abandonment of normal behavior in favor of a particular understanding of self-interest.

A variant of the pessimistic reading focuses on the amorality of Pericles' politics: he expounds a rationalism that is secular, material, and entirely unrestrained in its devotion to the pursuit of interest, empire, and glory over justice.¹⁸ These readings tend to take the amorality and secular pursuit of glory on Pericles' part as proof of a deeper Thucydidean concern with the gods and the limits of secular reason and political activity in achieving the good life.¹⁹ Such readings assume that Pericles' mode of reasoning is, for Thucydides, representative of reason, as such: "We may thus say without exaggeration that Pericles, attempting to complete the project begun by Themistocles, would finally jettison the old, pious, peaceful Athens, aiming at a wholly new, "enlightened" politics directed by human intelligence."²⁰ In short, Pericles is taken as the quintessential man of reason and Thucydides, through his implicit critique of Pericles, is showing the inadequacy of worldly politics devoid of higher meaning. As such, he is taken to be

¹⁸ Leo Strauss notes, "the concern with sempiternal and universal fame calls for boundless striving for ever more; it is wholly incompatible with moderation." *The City and Man*, 223.

¹⁹ Christopher Bruell, "Thucydides and Perikles," 24-29. Michael Palmer, "Love of Glory and the Common Good." Clifford Orwin writes, "Without actually mentioning the gods... Thucydides nods in their direction. A murmur of the divine pervades his work..." "Thucydides on Nature and Human Conduct," in *The Oxford Handbook of Thucydides*, ed. Ryan K. Balot, Sara Forsdyke, and Edith Foster (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017), 368. Cf. Timothy W. Burns, "The Problematic Character of Periclean Athens," in *On Civic Republicanism*, ed. Geoffrey C. Below and Neven Leddy (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2016). A great deal depends on how one understands "the divine" in these interpretations. Steven Forde seems to understand it as having nothing to do with traditional Greek religion or piety, so much as a belief that there are forces outside human control. *Ambition to Rule*, 49. Cf. Adam Parry, who describes the plague as "the superhuman enemy" as opposed to "the Periclean attempt to exert some kind of rational control over the historical process." "The Language of Thucydides' Description of the Plague," *Bulletin of the Institute of Classical Studies* 16 (1969): 116.

²⁰ Burns, "The Problematic Character of Periclean Athens," 16.

leading his discerning reader away from conventional politics and towards religion or philosophy.²¹

In this chapter I hold that such readings are too quick to assume that Pericles' rationalism is truly rational, and are thus incorrect to conclude that his eventual failure demonstrates the inadequacy of unassisted reason. The point that Thucydides demonstrates is that precisely those who consider their approach to be the most rational are subject to distinctively irrational excesses. Thucydides critiques Pericles from a perspective of reason, then, and in the service of a better kind of reasoning. The lesson to be learned is not of the need for custom or religion upon which to base politics, or of the need for thoughtful individuals to remove themselves from politics in pursuit of philosophy, but of the need for a more rationally self-aware perspective. Recognizing human limitations is rational.

Whether we read Thucydides as an arch-rationalist or as a tragic pessimist has broad consequences for how we understand Thucydides' usefulness to contemporary readers. On this topic, as with most in the scholarship of Thucydides, there are diverging approaches. One sees him as establishing a science of enduring principles useful for any generation of statesmen or military leader.²² By showing us the enduring causes of war, Thucydides seeks to educate future statesman. Another approach reads him as an ironist who denies precisely the certainty that science promises. In this reading, there is little if anything that human judgment can do to control

²¹ Christopher Bruell makes this case most succinctly, writing, "Thucydides...shows us the necessity for philosophy..." "Thucydides and Perikles," 29. Cf. David Bolotin, "Thucydides," in *History of Political Philosophy*, ed. Leo Strauss and Joseph Cropsey (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1987), 9-10.

²² Ober, "Thucydides and the Invention of Political Science." On Thucydides as a "manual for future statesman," Finley, *Thucydides*, 50. Cf. Rahe, *Sparta's Second Attic War*, 54.

events in the face of chance, especially since humans are inherently unpredictable and prone to irrational excess.²³ The lesson that we are the playthings of chance can indeed be useful in a way, but it is very far from a modern political science in its claims to what can be known.

The following reading attempts to locate some enduring lessons in Thucydides, taking seriously his statement that his work was intended as a “possession for all time” (I.22.4) intended to help his reader towards lasting knowledge of the principles of politics beyond his moment. In this reading, I hope to draw on the best of both approaches outlined above. Thucydides can be a pessimistically tragic and a scientific thinker simultaneously if we understand “rationalism” to entail a principle of self-imposed restraint. Proper reasoning includes the second-order reasoning on the subject (and limitations) of reason itself. The principal danger facing political actors is not that human action is irrational and therefore unpredictable, but that we will misunderstand the scope of reason. The tragic and ironic aspects of Thucydides do not undercut a rationalist project but reinforce it if we understand that the crowning irony of the work is that those actors most committed to reason tend to be susceptible to misunderstanding the scope of rational planning. Thucydides is not despairing of our ability to learn and plan, but is noting our tendency towards an overconfidence in our ability to do so. A proper rationalism, in Thucydides’ account, is cautious and aware of its limitations. In other words, when we reason about how to achieve a desired goal, we need to have an awareness of what it is we are doing and how our belief in our ability to reason can contribute to poor reasoning.

²³ See Geoffrey Hawthorn for a recent version of this lesson, which he broadens to the lesson that little can be learned from Thucydides beyond the maxim that there are “complex explanations of actions” and that the factors that explain events in one time may not hold true in another time. *Thucydides on Politics*, 232, 236. Cf. W.R. Connor, *Thucydides*, for the reading of Thucydides as arch-ironist.

Judgment and Chance: Pericles' Speeches

Before looking to Pericles' distinctive confidence in human reason, it is helpful to review his broader rhetoric of empire. To motivate his audience, Pericles repeatedly invokes an ideal of an Athenian empire that is limited neither by geography nor by mortality. There is, in Pericles' account, literally no limit on Athens' potential expansion, as their navy will allow them to go wherever there is a sea to dominate (II.62.2). Likewise, they have no need to fear failure: they have achieved such a powerful status that, regardless of the outcomes of their endeavors, they will be remembered (II.64.3). When Pericles famously exhorts the Athenians to become lovers of the city (II.43.1) through which the Athenians "will be the wonder of present and future ages" (II.41.4), we can see that there is no limit to their potential success: even if they should fail, failure in pursuit of greatness would make a glorious mark. No degree of unpopularity or possibility of consequences for their actions can obscure their fame (or notoriety). When Pericles celebrates the Athenians' leaving "memorials of good and bad things" throughout the world, we should take it not to be a traditional Greek value of doing good to friends and harm to enemies, but a statement of the irrelevance of morality to their exercise of power and their reputation for greatness (II.41.4).²⁴ Thus, while one could argue that Pericles' perspective shifts from confidence in success to an acknowledgment of the possibility of defeat, on a more fundamental level his confidence increases, as he claims for the first time in his final speech that no defeat can

²⁴ This kind of thinking links Pericles to other Athenian spokesmen throughout the work: "What makes the Athenians in Thucydides irresistibly more fascinating than their opponents is the reader's frank realization of their unabashed immorality, which bestows on them the majesty of royal predators." Hermann Strasburger, "Thucydides and the Self-Portrait of the Athenians," in *Thucydides*, ed. Jeffrey S. Rusten (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 211.

erase the memory of Athens. This provides each individual Athenian a way to transcend the limitations even of mortality itself. Because Athens is guaranteed to be remembered, it provides what Edmunds has called a “redemption of individual limitations” to its citizens who are, by extension, also guaranteed immortality.²⁵

The immortalizing potential of the city in Pericles’s account sits uneasily with traditional 5th-century Greek values as found in tragedy, which tend to emphasize the divine and unknowable basis of glory or infamy, rather than the purely human standard which Pericles endorses. It also seems to sit uneasily with Homeric martial values that cast honor and success in war as an individual virtue that runs counter to social goods.²⁶ In place of a traditional piety it is often argued that Pericles is influenced by the secular scientific thinking of the pre-Socratics, including his friend Anaxagoras and his contemporary Protagoras.²⁷ Fewer scholars have observed that Pericles’ essentially political standard of human worth is a break from the pre-Socratic philosophic tradition as well.²⁸ While the pre-Socratics shared with Pericles a material focus and a strong belief in the power of reason (including as opposed to chance, discussed

²⁵ Edmunds, *Chance and Intelligence*, 211.

²⁶ On both of these points, Samons, “Pericles and Athens,” 292. On the anti-social dimensions of the heroic in Homer, James Redfield, *Nature and Culture in the Iliad* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1975), 116.

²⁷ His distinctive style of rhetoric is exceptionally analytical and tends towards causal links, testifying to a “radical intellectuality” that would fit in with a general thesis of intellectual debt to the pre-Socratic philosophers. Daniel P. Tompkins, “The Language of Pericles,” in *Thucydides Between History and Literature*, ed. Antonis Tsakmakis and Mélina Tamiolaki (Boston: De Gruyter, 2013), 453.

²⁸ Edward Hussey notes that Pericles’ unrestrained thinking contrasts with Democritus, and argues that Thucydides was closer to Democritus’ mode of thinking (as also indicated by the language of physical movement and greatness that Thucydides employs in Book One). “Thucydidean History and Democritean Theory,” in *CRUX: Essays in Greek History*, ed. P.A. Cartledge and F.D. Harvey (London: Duckworth, 1985), 119-20.

below), their focus was on the individual and the soul as a subject to be understood distinct from politics.²⁹ As Edmunds has noted, “It is the originality of Pericles, as Thucydides presents him, to have seen the essentially political character of man. The polis, not nature or the universe, is man’s home.”³⁰ For Pericles, it is the city that defines human worth. This is an innovation that cannot be explained by his intellectual context.³¹ It is not unlikely that Thucydides intended Pericles’ to appear to the reader as a dangerously innovative ideologue, articulating a totalizing patriotism which would have seemed ominous to readers in the years after Athens’ defeat

²⁹ The rejection of chance as an explanation for events links Pericles to many pre-Socratic thinkers, including Anaxagoras and Democritus. See W.K.C. Guthrie, *A History of Greek Philosophy*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1962), vol. 2, 272. In a quotation attributed to Democritus, we find a strikingly similar sentiment: “Humans have fabricated an image of fortune as a screen for their imprudence (*abouliê*). For only rarely does fortune fight against prudence (*phronêsis*), and most of the things in life an intelligent sharp-sightedness straightens out.” *Early Greek Philosophy*, ed. and trans. André Laks and Glenn W. Most (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2016), D403.

³⁰ Edmunds, *Chance and Intelligence*, 83. Pericles’ fascinating reticence in referring to Athens by name, and his preference for using generalizing terms such as “the city” hint at his philosophical or scientific way of thinking. He admires Athens because Athens is the most perfect instantiation of the city.

³¹ Philip A. Stadter, “Pericles Among the Intellectuals,” *Illinois Classical Studies* 16, no. 1 (1991): 111-124. While it is clear that the historical figure was influenced by acquaintances including Aspasia, none of the 5th- and 4th-century sources support a substantive link between Pericles’ politics and the intellectual milieu of the sophists and pre-Socratics. It has been argued that Pericles’ focus on the polis as the measure of all things reflects the influence of the sophists such as Protagoras, whom he is reported by Plutarch to have known (Plutarch, “Pericles,” 232. Cf. Neil O’Sullivan, “Pericles and Protagoras,” *Greece and Rome* 42, no. 1 (April, 1995): 15-23. Pericles has also been linked to the sophists by a number of scholars for his rhetorical acumen (Finley, *Thucydides*, 101; Edmunds, *Chance and Intelligence*, 15). But there is little in the content of his speeches that links him to the sophists. The single anecdote linking Pericles to Protagoras is an account of a disagreement, and is doubted by Plutarch as a possible slander on the part of Pericles’ disaffected son (Plutarch, “Pericles,” 232). The evidence of Plato’s *Protagoras* is that the sophists taught a kind of egalitarian democratic theory as a justification or their celebration of rhetoric, and Pericles’ speeches are entirely lacking such a theory. If anything, Pericles’ confidence in Athenian exceptionalism, his faith in the goodness of *nomoi*, and his denigration of words in favor of action (explored in the previous chapter) indicates a set of beliefs that run counter to the sophists.

(perhaps the way that the strident language of patriotic unity from the lead-up to the Iraq war has a different ring to it in retrospect).

Pericles' rhetoric of city and empire as extensions of the individual seems to be original to him, particularly to the extent that it is characterized by a sense of limitless potential. This limitlessness is most obvious in his language of foreign policy when he discusses the likelihood of success and praises the Athenians for their uniquely capable judgment. At I.140.1, Pericles urges the Athenians to go along with his strategy and reject the Spartan ultimatum regarding the Megaran Decree because things will turn out well for them on account of their planning, in the face of which bad luck is nothing to worry about:

It is admitted that the outcomes of events turn out no less senselessly than the plans (διανοίας) of man: on account of which, whenever something turns out contrary to calculation (λόγον), we are accustomed to blame chance (I.1490.1).³²

The above passage highlights an underappreciated aspect of Pericles' thinking. It could be read as a platitude about how people blame bad luck when it is really bad planning that is to blame, and as such we should try to plan as best we can. Such a sentiment would not be unique to Pericles: it is expressed by Archidamus when he urges delay to his Spartan audience, as well as Nicias and Hermocrates in their pleas for thorough preparation.³³ But, as Edmunds has noted, Pericles is claiming that chance is itself a result of inadequate planning: "Pericles describes adversity *in terms of* human planning, which thus becomes the criterion. Adverse luck is then

³² ἐνδέχεται γὰρ τὰς ξυμφορὰς τῶν πραγμάτων οὐχ ἧσσον ἀμαθῶς χωρῆσαι ἢ καὶ τὰς διανοίας τοῦ ἀνθρώπου: δι' ὅπερ καὶ τὴν τύχην, ὅσα ἂν παρὰ λόγον ξυμβῆ, εἰώθαμεν αἰτιᾶσθαι.

³³ Cited in Edmunds, *Chance and Intelligence*, 17, 75.

understood as that which was unplanned, badly planned, or contrary to plan.”³⁴ This is the force of the claim that “outcomes... turn out no less senselessly than the plans of man.” While people often blame bad luck for adverse outcome, this is a mistake. By making human planning the determining factor in the scope of chance, the resulting perspective reduces chance to something that can be tamed or reliably accounted for. What seem to be chance events are in reality nothing more than the result of inadequate planning. As Edmunds puts it: “Events may fail us as much as we are capable of failing ourselves through bad planning.”³⁵ Pericles sees human calculation as unlimited by fortune. The more thorough one’s planning, the less role fortune will play.

Since fortune does not play favorites, in Pericles’ formulation, in practice this means that superior planning will always win the day. He establishes his view on rational judgment taming chance in his initial speech, when he recounts the origins of Athenian greatness: “Our fathers beat back the barbarian through judgment (γνώμη) more than chance, and daring rather than power” (I.144.4). Pericles sees thoroughness of planning and the willingness to act on one’s plan as the keys to success. Despite his emphasis on Athens’ material, monetary, and technical advantages over the Peloponnesians, he believes that the truest strength lies in the certainty that sound judgment (when acted upon with daring) provides. This brings us to his famous praise in the funeral oration of the Athenians for their unique blend of intelligence and action:

For in this too we are surpass others. We are the ones who, with respect to what we are trying our hand at, most of all are both daring and calculating (ἐκλογίζεσθαι), whereas for others ignorance leads to confidence and calculation (λογισμὸς) leads to timidity. The soul should rightly be judged to be strongest for those who anticipate most clearly what is terrible and what is pleasant but are not on that account turning away from danger (II.40.3).

³⁴ Ibid, 17.

³⁵ Ibid, 16.

There are two points of concern in this passage. The first is that it is flattering and self-congratulatory and as such likely to contribute to self-confident action more than introspective restraint. The other point is that the language here is highly analytical and rationalistic and as such points to the limitation of Pericles' vision of the formula for success. Pericles does not celebrate wisdom or knowledge or even the enlightenment of common opinion (*doxa*)—rather, he celebrates their powers of logic or calculation (*logismos*). For Pericles, the Athenians can have faith in their powers of judgment, because their judgment is closer than others' to pure reason.

The Athenians' logical superiority gives them superior powers of perception, and because of their superior perception, they should confidently maintain their chosen course of action and never alter course (or “turn away”). This is the kind of confidence that leads people to double down on a chosen course of action rather than reconsider it. As I explored in the previous chapter, the role of a good adviser in a healthy democracy should be to facilitate reconsideration and rethinking of policy, not to foreclose change. By denigrating change as thoughtless aversion to danger, Pericles doubles down on his anti-deliberative model of democratic action. What bears emphasizing is Pericles' idea that through calculation the Athenians can anticipate what will happen. The power of *logos* without any accumulation of knowledge or experience is enough, in Pericles' words, to guarantee that they will have no cause to reconsider a course of action.³⁶

³⁶ Contra Ryan Balot, who sees Pericles as inculcating a sense of self-aware restraint through his celebration of a courage informed by reason. *Courage in the Democratic Polis: Ideology and Critique in Classical Athens* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), 32-38.

Pericles' perspective on chance as subservient to rational human judgment is clarified in his final speech, when he claims that whatever the Athenians can plan about is secure, since contingencies of fortune can be factored into planning and will simply never play favorites:

Go against your enemies not only with pride (φρονήματι) but even with contempt (καταφρονήματι). For while boastfulness may belong to any coward on the basis of a fortunate ignorance, contempt (καταφρόνησις) belongs to whoever can trust in judgment (γνώμη) to be superior over his opponents—which is the case for us. *On account of the sameness of chance* (ἀπὸ τῆς ὁμοίας τύχης), intelligence (ξύνεσις) fortifies daring through contempt; it places trust less in hope, which is the recourse of the desperate, than in judgment (γνώμη) from existing resources, upon which is built a stronger foresight [emphasis added] (II.62.4-5).

Pericles here indicates that chance is a constant and equally distributed force.³⁷ It cannot play favorites because it is not a god with a will or something to be appeased or enraged. The negative formulation—that chance cannot be depended upon to rescue us from our poor planning—might be read as a call for prudence—we should not rely on fortune to rescue us from the results of poor planning. But the positive formulation that Pericles expresses is that because chance is “the same” towards everyone it will never favor anyone over another. As Pericles states explicitly, the Athenians in fact have superior capabilities of judgment (γνώμη) because they are more intelligent (ξύνεσις), so the implication is that they effectively always will have chance on their side. Pericles uses a range of words to describe intelligence, reason, calculation, planning, and judgment. He seems to equate all them, as if the capacity to make a sound judgment in war were no more complex than the capacity to calculate the superiority of one's material resources. The

³⁷ Edmunds makes the insightful translation point that the thrust of Pericles' claim is that chance is, in fact, equal for everyone—not that Pericles is claiming confidence only in circumstances where chance might be equal. *Chance and Intelligence*, 74. Contra Rusten, who sees an “ἀπό of circumstances” and translates it, “when luck is impartial.” *The Peloponnesian War: Book II*, ad loc.

most telling formulation, for our purposes, is that he contrasts judgment (γνώμη) with chance (τύχη), just as he did before in explaining their ancestors' victory "through judgment more than chance" (I.144.4), as if human judgment and chance operated in entirely different spheres.³⁸

With chance accounted for, the Athenians should treat their enemies with "contempt." Telling your audience that they should regard their opponents with contempt is hardly a good way to motivate prudence. Contempt (καταφρόνησις) is generally a negative word in Thucydides; while translators and commentators often try to soften its implications, I believe that it is aptly chosen by Thucydides to highlight the dangerous mindset that Pericles encourages.³⁹ The association of contempt with *hubris* is direct in Aristotle, who groups "contempt" (καταφρόνησις) alongside *hubris* as a form of "belittling" that provokes anger in others: "for one who shows contempt belittles (people have contempt for those things that they think are of no account, and they belittle things of no account)."⁴⁰ The language of contempt would likely have struck Thucydides' contemporaries as deeply ominous.

While Pericles at first glance seems to be advocating the need to plan thoroughly, his notion that "outcomes of events turn out no less senselessly than the plans of man" would likely have struck Thucydides' readers as a dangerous way of measuring the world through human intelligence. Good planning is all that matters. The implication is that we should plan well not so

³⁸ Elsewhere it would seem that the unusual contrast of judgment with chance clearly favors the power of chance. When Thucydides contrasts judgment with chance in his description of the Spartan reputation at V.75.3, he notes that the Spartans were thought to have had good judgment, but were overcome nonetheless by misfortune in their defeat at Pylos.

³⁹ James A. Andrews notes the "dangerous and foolish" meaning of the word at I.111.4 and 2.11.4, but nonetheless concludes that Pericles is simply encouraging a combination of "reason and courage." "Cleon's Ethopoetics," 29.

⁴⁰ *On Rhetoric*, trans. George Kennedy (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 1378b.

much to avoid disaster, but to guarantee success, as the result of judgment is a “stronger foresight.” This notion that success can effectively be guaranteed by the Athenians’ superiority in planning feeds their catastrophic decision-making in the Sicilian Debate, which we explore below. Similarly, their faith in their capacity to guarantee success through planning feeds their inability to speak convincingly to others about the role of chance or the consequences of their actions, as we see below.

A brief survey of some key episodes leading up to the Sicilian Debate illustrates how the Athenians’ focus on reason to the exclusion of all other factors establishes the theme of excessively confident rationalism in their dealings with others. The Athenians adopt a rationalistic framework for justifying their actions to others, but they are not reasonable (in the sense of being either open-minded or restrained) in their application of their framework, and as a result they are not persuasive to other cities in their appeals to reason. Nor are they able to accept that differing values and ways of thinking about self-interest or assessing risk might be rational. The Athenian overconfidence in the powers of judgment is much like Pericles’ overconfidence that we discussed in the last chapter—that his judgment should be the final word on a matter. Just as Pericles does not see the value of further consideration of an issue that he has spoken on, the Athenians cannot see the value of other Greeks’ perspectives.

The Melian Dialogue: Rhetoric of Reason

At Melos the Athenian envoys exhibit the characteristic Athenian rhetoric of unapologetic reason and self-justification, which links them not only to Pericles but to the earliest Athenian defense

of their empire to the Spartans before the outbreak of the war (I.73-78).⁴¹ The Melians invoke god-sent chance as grounds for hope against the overwhelming might of the Athenians (V.104) but the Athenians rebut this claim with their own contention that, absent any reason to assume special favor from the gods, the Athenians may be equally favored (V.105).⁴² Chance is thus not a relevant or rational consideration.

Stahl reads the Melian Dialogue as a moment of rational injustice to which the Melians respond with irrational defiance.⁴³ The Athenians are right that the Melians have little realistic hope of success, regardless of the justice of their cause. Alternatively, it has been argued that the Athenians are the ones engaging in irrational wishful thinking, in that they fail to anticipate the possibility of their own coming failure at Sicily, which follows shortly after the events at Melos.⁴⁴ Ober and Perry have read the Melian Dialogue, paired with the Sicilian Dialogue, as

⁴¹ As Stahl and others have noted, the Melian dialogue's amoral depiction of Athenian empire is consistent with the view that we find articulated by the Athenian envoys to Sparta before the outbreak of the war, so the old-fashioned reading of Athenian moral decline from an earlier restraint has little basis. Stahl, *Thucydides: Man's Place in History*, 48. Cf. Macleod, *Collected Essays*, 65; Clifford Orwin, *The Humanity of Thucydides*, 22, 111; Martha Taylor, *Thucydides, Pericles, and the Idea of Athens in the Peloponnesian War*. For the alternative reading of Athenian decline, the best example is J. Peter Euben, "The Battle of Salamis and the Origins of Political Theory," in *Corrupting Youth: Political Education, Democratic Culture, and Democratic Theory* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997), 83-4.

⁴² When Thucydides has unnamed "Athenians" make their city's case, it is not unlikely that they are intended to be particularly representative. Strauss, *City and Man*, 170.

⁴³ "In the Melian Dialogue we have a view of humanity, not in terms of its values, but rather primarily in terms of its (in)capacity to grasp the reality of a given situation." *Man's Place in History*, 168. Cf. Orwin, *Humanity*, 110-116.

⁴⁴ My reading is similar to that of Gerald Mara, who sees the Athenians as adhering to a "dangerous illusion" that their understanding of human nature and necessity is universal and unquestionable to the point of being the only rational position, "Thucydides and Political Thought," 112. Cf. Hugh Lloyd-Jones, who reads the failure at Sicily as following from the Athenians' hubris, much the same way that transgression invites retribution in tragedy. *Justice of Zeus*, 144. James Boyd White sees the Athenians as the one displaying irrationality when they dismiss the possible repercussions of their brutality. *When Words Lose Their Meaning*, 77.

demonstrating a specific but “systematic” kind of irrationality tied to risk-taking, where costs and rewards are improperly weighted.⁴⁵ The lesson of these disastrous episodes is that it is important to do better than the Melians or the Athenians in thinking about risk: “optimal policy is, for Thucydides, rational policy insofar as probabilities ought to be rightly weighted.”⁴⁶ But it is not obvious that the Melians’ willingness to risk almost certain death for the sake of liberty is an absurd position.⁴⁷ They are aware that the odds are not in their favor, but choose to gamble anyway, much like the Athenians did in their own resistance to the Persians. The true failure is of the Athenian representatives to make a compelling and positive case for acquiescence in appealing to the Melians to surrender.

The Athenians’ confidence that their position is the only tenable one leads to their repeated insistence that they need not engage in arguments to the contrary. The famous oversimplified dictum that “the strong do as they will and the weak suffer what they must” actually refers to the scope of discussion or reasoning between the two of them. It could be rendered as “we do not think it fitting for you to expect to persuade us by saying...that you have done nothing unjust to us. Let us deal with which both of us truly think is possible; you know as well as we do that in human reason/speech (λόγῳ), matters of justice are adjudicated among those of equal constraints, while possibilities, by contrast, are defined by what the strong do and the weak accept” (V.89). The Athenians are not persuasive because they believe that their understanding of the scope of rational discussion must be universal, even as their notion of what

⁴⁵ Ober and Perry, “Thucydides as Prospect Theorist,” 208.

⁴⁶ Ibid, 213.

⁴⁷ Nor is it obvious that it is “ill-advised from the perspective of rationality as expected utility maximization.” Ibid, 215

counts as rational appears (to the reader and to the Melians) to be overly narrow. The Athenians exploit the double valence of *logos* as speech and reason—they do not need to engage in speeches about justice, because justice is not something that is a rational consideration in a conflict between such uneven powers. The Melians are mistaken to think that there is a rational claim that they could make to the Athenians that is different from what the Athenians have already decided.

The Athenians are so confident in their own rationality and in the irrationality of the Melians that they fail to speak to the Melians' concerns in a compelling way. They offer no positive inducements—no honorable path, or joint partnership, or moral case for a united Greece, for example. Such inducements might occur to the reader as reasonable, but the Athenians' understanding of what is and is not reasonable is truncated to the point of their being unable to persuade even the almost helpless Melians of the rationality of acquiescence. Because no consideration of the gods, or of honor, or of the possibility of future retribution or of the nobility of resistance against the odds is deemed rational, and the Athenians are confident that understanding of the scope of reason is perfect, they fail to reason with others. It is not simply the case, then, that they overestimate the rationality of the Melians. Rather, they underestimate the realm of things to be reasoned about, even as they overestimate the persuasiveness of appeals to reason as such. The eventual victory of the Athenians should not distract us from the failure of thinking and of persuasion that preceded it.

The Occupation at Delium

Another episode illustrative of the scope of the Athenians' overconfidence in their rational capacities is their behavior and self-justifying speech at Delium (IV.89-101). The Athenians here indicate that anything can be rationalized and no norm should restrain the pursuit of self-interest. In this incident, the Athenians set up a base on a shrine and then suffer a defeat in battle. They request a truce to retrieve the dead, but their enemies the Boeotians insist that first the Athenians evacuate the holy ground that they are defiling in violation of the "laws of the Greeks" (IV.97.2). The Athenians respond that they are not in violation of any such laws, because to the extent they have violated the sacred area it has been "out of necessity and not out of *hubris*...and everything done under the strictures of war and danger is reasonably (*εἰκὸς*) pardoned, even by the god" (IV.98.6). What is striking here is not only the Athenians' obvious transgression of the sacred, but their claim that the god will assign blame only "reasonably" (or "equitably"). Like their counterparts at Melos (V.105), their faith in reason is such that they place the gods under the constraints of a rational moral framework just as they would human actors.

Clifford Orwin sees this claim as hinting at a broader tension built into any form of piety—that even the gods cannot expect human beings to defy basic necessities, and this is evidence that the gods are subject to laws of nature or necessity.⁴⁸ But the Athenians' contention is not that the gods are constrained just as humans are. It is that the gods will behave reasonably, or fairly in meting out punishment, and that the constraint of necessity will therefore warrant forgiveness. They do not quite go so far as to claim that the gods *must* forgive them, as Orwin implies, but that it would be fair for the gods to do so. All the same, their claim implies that they

⁴⁸ Orwin, *Humanity*, 96, 106.

can reason accurately about outcomes even to the point of predicting divine retribution. It is a claim to knowledge about the gods, combined with an assumption that the gods can be assuaged by reasonable excuses. Such a claim runs counter to the view of the divine that we might gather from other 5th-century sources, which emphasize the misguidedness of human attempts to make sense of or direct divine actions.⁴⁹ Reading the Delium episode alongside the Melian dialogue allow us to get to the basic Athenian problem. The Athenians exhibit an arrogance that invites destruction not in their brutal destruction of innocents like the Melians (which Thucydides barely mentions and clearly refrains from dwelling on), but in their hubristic confidence that there is nothing that they cannot subject to their understanding.⁵⁰ It is their confidence in their ability to understand the ordering the world, and not their belief in a natural order *per se*, that we should see as the problem.

The Debate at Camarina

Perhaps the single clearest articulation of the Athenians' excessive and unrestrained rationalism (and its inadequacy) comes from Euphemus, the Athenian envoy to Camarina. He justifies the Athenians' pursuit of empire with the simple claim, "for a man who is a tyrant or for a city that

⁴⁹ In tragedy, the actions of the gods are rarely fair or reasonable, nor is divine wrath reserved for the guilty. Herodotus evinces a faith in the comprehensibility of events and divine influence, but only in retrospect.

⁵⁰ To the point that it is not the destruction of Melos that is particularly worthy of comment, it is precisely Thucydides' refraining from condemning either the Athenians' speech or the death of the Melians that has led so many to identify the Athenians' speech with Thucydides' own view. See Connor, *Thucydides*, 151. Cf. Mara, who notes that the fate of Melos is no different from Scione (V.32), and thus we should understand that the dialogue itself is what makes this incident unique. Mara, "Thucydides and Political Thought," 108. As it is, we do not even know if the Athenians who spoke with the Melians participated in the destruction of that city, so the connection between the speeches and the following events is attenuated.

has an empire, nothing is unreasonable (ἄλογον) that is beneficial, and no one is kindred who is not trusted.” (VI.85.1). For Euphemus, reasoned pursuit of self-interest is the only relevant consideration. He argues to the Camarinians that the Athenians are not interested in conquering all of Sicily because it would not be in their interest; rather, they are making a pre-emptive strike because they can anticipate that if Syracuse consolidate power in Sicily, as they aim to do, it would be a serious threat to Athenian security. The Athenians are thus reasonable and merely acting out of self-preservation, because they can correctly anticipate a future threat and understand the intentions of other cities (VI.85.3). Likewise, Euphemus indicates it would be rational for the Camarinians to join the Athenians, because the inevitable outcome otherwise is Syracusan dominance of all of Sicily.⁵¹ Running through his speech, then, is not only an open disregard for moral constraints on the pursuit of self-interest, but an unrestrained confidence in the power to predict and reason through future events.

Tellingly, Euphemus’ stark devotion to reason and self-interest is unpersuasive, much like the Athenians at Melos. The Camarinians decline to join the Athenian cause. Euphemus’ rhetoric evinces a blinkered perspective on what motivates both the Athenians and others, combined with a confidence that if he expresses his case starkly enough, others must see the compelling logic of the Athenians’ case. Because Euphemus refrains from making broad claims about human nature and insists that Athens’ motivations are merely self-preservation, Orwin argues that he disingenuously presents the Athenians as “old-fashioned” adherents of “traditional notions of justice,” while Steven Forde likewise finds a stated “nostalgic respect” for “the old

⁵¹ ἀνάγκη δέ, literally, “It will necessarily happen...” (VI.85.3).

moral categories.”⁵² But this reading seems to neglect the extent to which his rhetoric shockingly contradicts traditional Greek values, particularly in his implied belief that the rational pursuit of material benefit can excuse injustice, and that self-interest delimits what is rational (VI.86.5).⁵³ Euphemus shares and clarifies the mode of thinking that we identified in Pericles as well as the Athenians at Melos and Delium: that reason is the only relevant authority, and that, given proper calculation, the Athenians can plan about future events with a confidence uninhibited by considerations of chance or the gods.

Hermocrates of Syracuse opposes Euphemus. In his speech to the Camarinians, he articulates an alternative to the Athenian perspective. He points out that, while the Camarinians may hope for an ideal outcome in which the Syracusans are humbled but not destroyed by Athens, to count on this would be “entertaining a hope and purpose beyond human power. No one can be the paymaster of fortune as he is of his own desires” (VI.78.2). Hermocrates here offers what seems to be the more Thucydidean perspective. As Edmunds has noted, “The self-confidence of Pericles is in marked contrast with the humbler view of Hermocrates (4.64.1), who considers it foolishness to believe...that I am complete master equally of my own mind and of chance, which I do not rule.”⁵⁴ Not only is his argument more persuasive to the Camarinians, it is

⁵² Orwin, *Humanity*, 126. Forde, *The Ambition to Rule*, 65.

⁵³ See Stahl, 126n4. Contra Strasburger, who sees Euphemus’ as a shameless propagandist for Athenian empire who therein demonstrates to an astute reader Thucydides’ intention of revealing the moral bankruptcy of Athens. “Thucydides and the Self-Portrait of the Athenians.” 209-210. While it is clearly an overly rosy picture of Athens’ history and intentions, it is in keeping with earlier demonstrations of an Athenian mode of thinking, and his claims that Athens provides tangible benefits to all of Greece is not, on the face of it, absurd.

⁵⁴ Edmunds, *Chance and Intelligence*, 17. For other favorable comparisons of Hermocrates to Pericles, see Lebow, *The Tragic Vision of Politics*, 153; Gerald Mara, *Civic Conversations*, 118; Monoson and Loriaux, “The Illusion of Power,” 291.

in keeping with the theme of all of his speeches—that it is most prudent to be daring and act in a timely fashion in preparing for possible threats (VI.33-34). Hermocrates embraces daring in the service of preserving and defending the city (rather than the reckless expansionist daring of the Athenians) and is vindicated at every juncture. His approach to chance is not to assume, as Pericles does, that it can be mitigated entirely by good planning or that it affects all equally; rather, he assumes that chance is unlikely to cooperate with anyone’s plans.⁵⁵ Yet there is no pious dimension to Hermocrates’ thinking. Like Pericles, he is secular and rational in his outlook, but differs in his humbler view of human capacity to understand or predict outcomes. Hermocrates can thus be taken to articulate the prudent negative version of Pericles’ rationalistic outlook.⁵⁶ While Pericles sees the link between human planning and the power of chance as a reason for confidence in anticipating success, Hermocrates sees it as a reason for cautious preparation in the hope of avoiding disaster. Chance is something that can be mitigated through planning only to a degree, and this is by no means grounds for assuming success.⁵⁷

Hermocrates thus shows us a third way between Athenian daring and Spartan caution. While the Spartans are cautious as a result of their characteristic moderation (σωφροσύνη), their caution is not based on a logical assessment of the situation.⁵⁸ They are, by all accounts,

⁵⁵ Cf. Desmond: “...it seems that Thucydides would insist on the practical limits of intelligence: chance is an indeterminate variable; its influence is quite real and should be feared as such.” “Lessons of Fear: A Reading of Thucydides,” 373.

⁵⁶ Contra Desmond, who sees Hermocrates as essentially “Periclean.” “Lessons of Fear,” 369.

⁵⁷ Similarly, Diodotus responds to Cleon’s anti-intellectualism by arguing that *logoi* should guide actions because there is no other way “to explore the future in all its uncertainty.” (III.42.2) Modes of reasoning may be flawed, but there is no alternative. The various wise figures like Diodotus and Hermocrates all take a restrained view towards reason—not celebrating potential success but cautioning against unwarranted assumptions.

⁵⁸ On σωφροσύνη as a Spartan characteristic, see I. 32.4, 68.1, 84.2, 86.2, III.59.1.

reflexively and unthinkingly cautious, even to their own detriment.⁵⁹ The Athenians, on the other hand, base their actions more consistently on calculation, but do so to an extreme and imprudent degree. The mean implied by the two cities and their characteristic but incomplete virtues is a moderation born of reason and a courage characterized by restraint. Hermocrates embodies and defends precisely these values.

Misapprehension and Chance in the Narrative

In contrast with Pericles' and the other Athenians' confidence that reason overcomes chance and provides foresight, Thucydides' narrative repeatedly highlights the limitations of anyone's ability to control events or to anticipate the intentions of other actors.⁶⁰ Crucial turning points during the Sicilian disaster (VII.2.4) as well as the victory at Sphacteria (V.39-40) are both explicitly attributed to chance. Looking beyond the theatre of war, the plague that follows Pericles' funeral oration is an unpredictable and clearly unfortunate consequence of his decision to crowd the people together in the close quarters of the city. Even those who pay special attention to chance cannot count on it: Nicias is motivated in his old age primarily by a desire to "preserve his good fortune" (V.16.1), which adds a tragically ironic twist to his unfortunate end.⁶¹

⁵⁹ According both to their allies, the Corinthians (I.70), and to Thucydides himself (VIII.96.5).

⁶⁰ F.M. Cornford made the role of chance in the Sphacteria episode central to his reading of Thucydides as a tragedian. *Thucydides Mythistoricus*, 90-97. Cf. Stahl, *Thucydides*, 95-98 and passim. Euben, "Battle of Salamis," 78. David Grene, *Greek Political Theory*, 76. William Desmond, "Lessons of Fear," 360. Given the centrality of this topic, it is surprising that there has not been more sustained study of how reasoning *about chance* is a theme in Thucydides.

⁶¹ Nicias, in contrast with Pericles, is careful to differentiate the realm of chance from that of planning, stating "we must plan many things well, and even more we must have good luck" (VI.23.3). He goes on to make the mistake of hoping that fortune will favor him (VII.61.3).

Not only do events defy prediction, attempts to anticipate events can easily have the perverse effect of bringing about absurd levels of misunderstanding. Human beings are not merely the playthings of chance, but are often the creators of their own misfortune in their attempts to avoid it. Stahl notes this counter-productive tendency, particularly in the lead-up to the Mytilene Debate, but concludes simply that events take on a life of their own that has little bearing on the original plan that set them in motion.⁶² For Stahl, attempts to plan for the future are always inadequate because of the incomprehensibility of human behavior, which defies all reason.⁶³ This is a strangely pessimistic conclusion, given that Thucydides is so thorough in presenting the rationale for the actions that people take; he offers programmatic statements about human behavior and motivations, which indicates that we can make sense of people's actions in some way.

It is overconfidence in one's ability to anticipate what other actors will do based on assumptions about their intentions, and the belief that one can take definitive action to neutralize the future actions of others, that Thucydides demonstrates to be self-destructive. The kind of thinking that leads people to pre-emptive strikes, for example, would be almost by definition unreasonable in Thucydides' view. This theme has been explored most thoroughly in readings of Book I on the causes of the outbreak of the war. It is now generally accepted that Thucydides is not offering a universal rule that conflict between rival hegemonic powers is simply inevitable or that international behavior is determined simply by relative power, but that contingent factors such as individual leadership, national character, concerns for moral reputation, and political

⁶² Stahl, *Man's Place in History*, 108-113.

⁶³ *Ibid*, 143-144.

ideology all play a role. While the conflict may not have been inevitable, the *belief* that it was inevitable plays a key role in starting the war.⁶⁴

During the Peace of Nicias, when both Sparta and Athens are scrambling to achieve what they can under the terms of their treaty, we see the deleterious consequences of the belief that one can pre-empt others' actions. Driven by such a belief, both the Spartans and Argives engage in needlessly provocative and ultimately counterproductive behavior (V.39-42). The dispute over Panactum becomes almost comical as it illustrates this point. The Spartans believe that if they return Panactum to the Athenians, then the Athenians will honor their commitment to leave Pylos. But the Boeotians who have occupied Panactum demand an alliance with Sparta before they hand it over. The Spartans know that such an alliance would be a violation of their treaty with Athens, but anticipate that the return of Panactum is important enough to the Athenians to justify their violation of the treaty in this regard. The Boeotians, unbeknownst to the Spartans, begin destroying Panactum so that it will not be of value to the Athenians, failing to see how destroying it will infuriate both the Athenians and the Spartans. Meanwhile, the Argives become concerned because they believe they will be isolated against a Peloponnesian-Boeotian alliance:

For they supposed that the Boeotians had been persuaded by the Lacedaemonians to tear down Panactum and to enter into the treaty with the Athenians; and they supposed that the Athenians knew these things, with the result that it was no longer possible for them to make an alliance with the Athenians; they had earlier hoped that in light of the contentions, even if their treaty with the Lacedaemonians might not last, at least they could be allies with the Athenians (V.40.2).

⁶⁴ For the Athenians at I.44.2 "Because it seemed to them that even so the war against the Peloponnesians would occur." The Spartans' motivation is expressed as fear of Athens' increasing power (I.23.6; I.88; I.118), which is somewhat less confident in its phrasing, but, like the Athenians, entails an assumption that war would come, and sooner would be better than later. Even Sthenelaidas, who stresses that the war will be a matter of punishing injustice, implies that the question is essentially one of timing: "do not permit the Athenians to grow greater" (I.86.5).

Ironically, it is the Argives' attempt to secure themselves from the imagined possibility of isolation and destruction that brings about their alliance with Athens and their involvement in a land campaign against Sparta, which ends in the largest battle of the conflict and complete disaster for Argos (V.73).⁶⁵ In the lead-up we see that a series of miscalculations and misapprehensions by the Spartans drive the Athenians and Argives together, which is precisely not their goal. The Spartans send envoys, who, in an attempt to be more persuasive, misrepresent their status as negotiators, while the Athenians misinterpret this as a sign of hostile intention. Taking unto umbrage with the Spartan negotiators, the Athenians fly into a rage and make an alliance with Argos (V.46).⁶⁶

Only Alcibiades correctly anticipates others' intentions and succeeds in manipulating people and the course of events based on his foresight. Thus, contra the pessimistic and defeatist reading propounded by Stahl, Thucydides is placing human agency at the center of things. Events do not simply spin out of control, but are actively shaped by human attempts to anticipate

⁶⁵ In some ways this section of the work, although among the less studied, most closely fits what Graham Allison labels the "Thucydides Trap"—where fear of possible conflict makes conflict inevitable. I would simply emphasize that it is more than simply fear—it is fear in combination with the confidence that one can accurately draw broad conclusions about others' intentions from particular events. People are prone to overreading possible threats and also overestimating what they can get away with in anticipating such (perceived) threats. This may seem a small distinction, but it offers a more optimistic reading of Thucydides as indicating that improved communication can forestall major conflict. Graham Allison, "The Thucydides Trap: Are the U.S. and China Headed for War?" *The Atlantic*, September 24, 2015, <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2015/09/united-states-china-war-thucydides-trap/406756/>

⁶⁶ Much of the misunderstanding along the path to conflict is engineered and manipulated by Alcibiades (V.45), so it is not randomness that we see, but the entanglement of misapprehension, and the unscrupulousness of Alcibiades' manipulation of that entanglement.

the actions and intentions of others. Nothing is more difficult than prudent foresight for Thucydides. Every city struggles to anticipate what will happen based on their deficient understanding of the thinking of others. This casts into stark relief the error of the Athenians in their confidence that their superior judgment and planning can guarantee success. Of course, any actor in international affairs must make some attempt to understand the thinking of others, even though errors in doing so are inevitable. But actors are likely to make matters worse insofar as they try to anticipate, rather than respond to, others' aggression. It is always tempting to assign clear and dangerous intent to the actions of others, and it is easy to lose sight of the complexity of others' thinking and motivations. The Athenians display a distinctively poor understanding of others, combined with a distinctively immodest faith in their capacities of comprehension.

The Sicilian Expedition as Culmination of Athenian Rationalism

The decision to launch the Sicilian Expedition shows the adverse consequences of the Athenian misunderstanding of the scope of what can be ascertained. As Josiah Ober and Tomer Perry have argued, the Athenians in this instance are seduced by the prospect of great gains while avoiding risk altogether. They come to believe that with enough resources committed to the expedition, risk can be reduced effectively to nothing; it is the certainty, and not simply the possibility, of great rewards that the Athenians see before them.⁶⁷ It is easy to forget that the glorious long-term objective of Mediterranean empire is not the subject of the debate at Athens. Rather, Nicias'

⁶⁷ Ober and Perry nonetheless take the lesson of Thucydides' text to be the opposite of mine: that Pericles and his kind of leadership models proper risk assessment, while inferior leadership leads to improper risk assessment. I believe, on the contrary, that Pericles' excessively confident and rationalist outlook anticipates and helps us to account for the distorted rationalism of the Sicilian decision. "Thucydides as Prospect Theorist," 206-232.

speech urges them to take every possible precaution as the debate barely touches on the possible rewards to be gained:

Fearing such things, and knowing that we must have much good counsel and still more good fortune (which is difficult, being humans), I want to set sail depending as little as possible on fortune, and to sail when we are as secure through preparation as we reasonably can be. That, I believe, offers *the most certain security* to the city altogether and to those of us serving as soldiers (VI.23.3) [emphasis added].⁶⁸

Nicias believes that by (somewhat disingenuously) emphasizing the need for preparation after detailing the difficulty of the project he can deter his audience from wishing to undertake the expedition in the first place. But he misunderstands his audience, who pick up strongly on his offering the possibility of a “most certain security”:

The Athenians, however, were not deterred from their desire for the voyage by the messiness of preparation; rather, they were all the more urged on, and it was the opposite of what he had anticipated: it seemed that he had advised well and that now there would *indeed be great security* (καὶ ἀσφάλεια νῦν δὴ καὶ πολλὴ ἔσσεσθαι). And erotic desire befell everyone alike to sail forth: for on the one hand the older men [believed] that either they would overwhelm those against whom they sailed or that there could be no disaster for such a great force; on the other hand those in the prime of life yearned for the sight and spectacle of a far-off place, full of good hope of a safe return... (VI.24.3).

It is the prospect of success without risk that entices the Athenians of all ages. Although Thucydides chooses language of erotic passion to describe their feeling, he dwells on their balanced and calculating thinking—men of different ages have different reasons, but all of them make sense. The irony of this moment is that the Athenians are *not* throwing caution to the winds. It is precisely their concern for security and mitigating risk that contributes to a confident and erotic fixation on the expedition. Rather than showing the power of passion to overwhelm

⁶⁸ ταῦτα γὰρ τῇ τε ξυμπάσῃ πόλει βεβαιότατα ἡγοῦμαι καὶ ἡμῖν τοῖς στρατευσομένοις σωτήρια...

reason, Thucydides shows reason facilitating a destructive passionate obsession.⁶⁹ While Pericles claims that nothing could restrain the superior judgment and reason of the Athenians, Thucydides shows us in the subsequent disaster at Sicily the misguidedness of believing that human planning can ever entirely mitigate chance, and that the belief in the power of reason to guarantee certain outcomes will lead to the least rational behavior.⁷⁰

Ober and Perry argue that here the Athenians are “acting unlike their ordinarily risk-seeking selves” in seeking to minimize their risk of losing by overinvesting in the expedition. But it seems rather that Athenians’ belief in the certainty of their venture is, in fact, characteristically Athenian. It is their faith in their special ability to calculate and anticipate what is needed that feeds their enthusiasm. Without their Athenian misconception about the power of their reason, they would not have believed that they could lock in the certainty of success in Sicily, and would not have felt the pangs of *eros* seize them so acutely. Contra the usual reading, their decision is not the result of irrational or ineluctable forces carrying them away; *eros* becomes a factor only after they have decided on the Expedition and have calculated how great a fleet to send in order to guarantee success.⁷¹ Thus it is not the case that their reasoning is undermined by passions, but that their passions are fed by their misunderstanding of their

⁶⁹ Ober and Perry, “Thucydides as Prospect Theorist,” 223.

⁷⁰ Interestingly, Athenagoras in Sicily dismisses the possibility of Athenian invasion because to do so would be “thinking badly” (κακῶς φρονῆσαι) (VI.36.1). While this has been translated by Mader as an “act of madness,” it seems to me to be a subtle authorial hint that the Athenians are thinking in the wrong way, and not an indication that they are behaving simply irrationally. Gottfried Mader, “Strong Points, Weak Argument: Athenagoras on the Sicilian Expedition (Thucydides 6.36-38),” *Hermes* 121, no. 4 (1993): 436.

⁷¹ Emma Lunbeck and Robert Stone, “The Wise Adviser Trap: Catastrophic Decision-Making in Herodotus and Thucydides,” *Journal of the History of Ideas* (forthcoming). Contra Stahl, “Blind Decisions.”

reasoning. This sets the Athenians apart from other actors who fall prey to wishful thinking, but do so, in Thucydides' own words, out of "thoughtless hope" and "uncertain wishes rather than a steadfast foresight" (4.108.4). The Athenians' worst impulses show that it is poor reasoning driven by overconfidence in their judgment that accounts for their most self-destructive decisions. If they had possessed a more modest understanding of their powers of calculation and prediction, they would not have become so passionately devoted to a misguided project.

Pericles' funeral oration: A Utopian Vision of Athens

Having explored how Thucydides shows the foolishness of Pericles' and the Athenians' confidence in their reasoning and inadequate regard for chance, I will now look towards Pericles' understanding of domestic politics. I argue that Pericles' has a utopian vision of society as a perfected and rational enterprise, within which individual citizens need exercise no self-restraint. Pericles acknowledges no principle of limitation and celebrates unrestrained activity. Looking to the plague as a commentary on the funeral oration, Pericles' optimism appears to be misplaced precisely because he takes an overly narrow view of the kinds of behavior that a rationally self-interested individual might engage in: the Athenians engage in their most destructive and antisocial behavior precisely as a result of their unrestrained but rational self-regard (not, as is often suggested, because they are carried away by passion). Thucydides links the excessive rationalism of Athenian imperial failure abroad with social breakdown at home.

Pericles' rhetoric focuses on motivating individuals to act for the common good.⁷² His argument is particular to Athens: given Athens' exceptionally glorious stature, an individual Athenian citizen can identify the good of the city with his own good. While citizens of other cities will always engage in petty squabbling and self-interested machinations, the Athenians have a unique opportunity to transcend the public-private distinction. As such, the Athenian citizen has no need of the traditional virtue of moderation.⁷³ Instead, by acting in a free and unrestrained manner, the Athenians are able to live lives of ease and comfort, while also maintaining a military force that rivals—or surpasses—even the Spartans. The Athenians manage to avoid excess or weakness despite their unrestrained easy living. This seems to be partially due to an innate character, but also results from their well-constructed laws and customs.

Despite their remarkably permissive and tolerant culture, the Athenians are also unique, Pericles claims, in their law-abidingness. “On account of fear (δέος), we are the least transgressive, ever listening to those in power and to the laws” (II.37.3). The Athenians are insulated from the usual consequences of their characteristic practices by their exceptional laws

⁷² Michael Palmer identifies in Pericles' speeches the “fundamental political problem of the conflict between the private good and the public good.” “Love of Glory and the Common Good,” 825.

⁷³ Thucydides seems to have associated the traditional word for moderation—σωφροσύνη—almost exclusively with the Spartans. This does not indicate a preference for the Spartans necessarily, but might indicate the connotations of that particular word were narrower than our associations with moderation. In Thucydides' account it is linked with unreflective behavior (I.68.1), much like Spartan courage, which Balot describes as “unreflectively carrying out duties imposed by their laws and *paideia*.” *Courage in the Democratic Polis*, 38. Further, the Spartan moderation is famously not a function of individual discipline. When Spartans are free of their city, they are easily corrupted. “Moderation” appears in the book as a sort of mirage that masks poorly thought out action or a failure to act (I.32.4, VIII.64.5).

and culture. Their exceptionalism owes nothing to fortune—it is a function of their innately good souls (εὐψυχῶ, II. 39.1) and “a courage not so much from laws as from character” (II.39.4), that the Athenians excel.

It is sometimes argued that Pericles celebrates the Athenians for their self-restraint; in contrast with the Spartans, who impose behavior on their citizens through rigorous education and strict laws, the Athenians are well-behaved with no need of such forceful measures. In this vein, Edmunds refers to the Athenians’ “inner sense of shame” that keeps them from breaking the laws.⁷⁴ But this assumes as an individual virtue something that Pericles actually attributes to external forces: it is “fear” which motivates the citizens to be “obedient to the laws,” (II.37.3) and not moderation or self-generated restraint. It is the perfect calibration of the laws, social mores, and individual interest that characterizes Athens and causes its citizens to live in such harmony.

Missing from Pericles’ speech is any reference to a cultivated or self-generated restraint—something that might exist in the absence of a fear of the laws. Although he uses the language of education, Pericles does not acknowledge that the Athenian character might be the result of an education. He neglects almost entirely the institutional practice of politics by Athenian citizens. He takes the end result of their practices and upbringing—a unique spirit of

⁷⁴ Edmunds, *Chance and Intelligence*, 59. Cf. Desmond, who sees the operative point that the citizens are *not* afraid of each other, which is a hallmark of healthy civic life. This fearlessness, when applied to international relations, however, leads to destruction. “Lessons of Fear,” 365-366. I take the fearlessness to be indicative of a problem at the level of individual motivations, so it is not accurate to say that “What is beneficial at home is folly abroad” (366). Rather, their faith in their perfectly engineered society mirrors their faith in their ability to perfectly engineer victories abroad. Their fearlessness in invading Sicily is a symptom of a deeper problem—their confident rationalism.

public life—and treats it as a fact without explaining its origins. The Athenians’ habituation is described as one of ease rather than labor (II.39.4): “In education, we live our lives unrestrained” in contrast with the Spartans’ cultivation of courage through “painful training” (II.39.1). His concept of education hardly seems to qualify as one, as it involves no practiced improvement and no discipline. A modern liberal reader might be tempted to read this as a defense of individual self-development through liberty, but it is precisely not that. Their unrestrained lifestyle does not breed individual self-restraint. Rather, it is fear of the laws of the city that prevents citizens from doing wrong, combined with the social pressure not to violate “those unwritten laws that bear the weight of agreed-upon shame” (II.37.3). Essentially, because Pericles believes that Athenian social life is perfected, he indicates both that there is no need for self-restraint as an individual virtue, and that the Athenians’ lack of such an individual virtue is a component of their greatness. Pericles’ view of domestic politics thus mirrors his understanding of foreign policy in that he has complete confidence in the Athenians’ ability to reason their way to ideal outcomes. In both cases, Thucydides’ narrative casts doubt on the Periclean vision.

Ryan Balot has recently made the case that Pericles is basically concerned with inculcating a self-aware interiority in the Athenians by appealing to their sense of shame and developing it as a safeguard against selfish actions: “Through helping the Athenians develop a proper sense of shame, Pericles encourages them to restrain their short-term desires and to internalize their ancestors’ behavior as an ideal.”⁷⁵ Balot, like many other scholars analyzing Pericles, seems to elide the difference between motivating and educating in Pericles’ speeches. There may be an act of shaming without an education in shame. In his final speech, when he

⁷⁵ Ryan K. Balot, *Courage in the Democratic Polis*, 34.

urges the Athenians not to fall below the standards set by their ancestors (II.62.3), Pericles attempts to shame them into fortitude, but this is not the same as “helping them to develop a proper sense of shame.” Likewise in the funeral oration, Pericles extols the civic-minded political activity of the Athenians, but this does not necessarily imply that they engage in such activity out of a “knowledge of human flourishing” or that their generally restrained behavior is the product of individual judgment.⁷⁶ Likewise, there is no evidence that Pericles takes shame to be an individual or “internalized other,” so much as a social force.⁷⁷

In short, instead of educating his audience in virtue, Pericles celebrates that their city provides the structure to make virtue unnecessary. In so doing, Pericles holds his audience and himself to different standards. While Pericles is unafraid to counter the people (II.65) and to do what is right in defiance of what is popular, he extols the Athenian people’s perfect calibration with society’s norms. The city is best served when he acts virtuously but when the citizens of Athens behave conventionally. He exercises a selflessness that he does not urge his listeners to adopt. There is no mention of truly self-generated self-restraint or personal discipline on the part of the Athenians.⁷⁸ The “fear of the laws” that keeps them well-behaved shows that their restrained behavior is not a function of character but is imposed upon them. Indeed, if there is one characteristic that every speaker seems to agree defines the Athenians, it is precisely their unrestrained daring, which has given them an empire.

⁷⁶ Ibid, 28.

⁷⁷ Ibid, 36.

⁷⁸ Edward Hussey notes that Pericles “breathes no word” of “individual and collective self-discipline... He talks of the fear of punishments and of shame as the guarantees of law-abidingness at 2.37.3; this if anything emphasizes the absence of any notion of inner discipline.” “Thucydidean History and Democritean Theory,” 124.

Confidence in reason links Pericles thinking on foreign affairs with his thinking on citizenship: Pericles' confidence in human planning over and against chance is mirrored by his confidence that Athens has transcended the need for individual virtue in its citizens. Just as no worry about the contingencies of fortune should ever restrain Athenian action abroad, no sense of inner compunction should restrain the Athenian citizen at home. In the principle of their foreign policy and in the practice of the domestic citizenship, a basic Periclean commitment is to the limitless potential of the Athenians' rational activity. The Athenians do as they think best, and that is the source of their greatness, both at home and abroad. Underlying this belief is his faith in reason—reason can construct a perfect society, reason motivates individual citizens to be sociable citizens, and reason will lead them to imperial success.

Thucydides on *nomoi* and Reasoned Self-interest: Plague and Stasis

It is clear that Thucydides does not share Pericles' sunny view of the perfection and power of Athens' *nomoi* as a substitute for self-generated restraint, or of the greatness of their unrestrained rationalistic activity. Pericles' ideal of the alignment of private and public interests is belied by the selfish leaders who follow his death. His faith that the city can satisfy all bodily needs of the citizens is belied by the plague. His notion that the Athenian character requires no self-discipline, but only its fullest expression to flourish, is belied by his own strategy of military restraint that he imposes on Athens when he urges them to hide behind their walls and avoid decisive confrontation with the Peloponnesian army.

In place of the Periclean vision, Thucydides implies that the management of self-interest is best achieved through an awareness of the limitations of what reason can accomplish. Such an

awareness can only make one less prone to excess. At the same time, an awareness of the powerlessness of *nomoi* in the face of the human tendency to calculate and pursue self-interest shows that Thucydides is not best understood as a conservative devoted to maintaining traditional norms. Rather, he is a modest rationalist. We cannot engineer a social structure that can replace individual virtue; nor can we trust that individuals' rational pursuit of self-interest will motivate sociable behavior.

The clearest evidence that Thucydides does not share Pericles' optimism that *nomoi* and fear of *nomoi* can substitute for self-generated restraint is found in the plague narrative. Contrary to the conventional reading, the problem of human behavior in such an extreme context is not that people abandon their reason, but rather that extreme contexts lead people to distort their reasoning and behave antisocially.⁷⁹ In such contexts people remain basically rational and pursue their interests in a calculating fashion. These scenarios reveal not so much the depravity or passion driving human actions as they reveal the consistent rational basis for human action.

The Athenians' behavior during the plague shows that social norms quickly lose their force, and that internally unrestrained individuals quickly engage in destructive behavior. It is not quite fair, though, to say that Pericles' praise of the Athenians' behavior is refuted by their subsequent behavior during the plague.⁸⁰ When the laws no longer excite fear, they behave in a

⁷⁹ See Monoson and Loriaux for the reading that the plague shows the limits of reason, "Illusion of Power," 285. Cf. Orwin, *Humanity*, 183.

⁸⁰ While the plague description is artfully placed after the funeral oration, it is not enough to say that it is an ironic commentary, "dramatic juxtaposition" (Connor, *Thucydides*, 64) or refutation (Adam Parry, "The Language of Thucydides' Description of the Plague," 116) of Pericles. In an important sense, it complements Pericles' oration. Given that Pericles sees Athenian social harmony as a function of the Athenians' fear of the perfected laws, in the absence of such a fear of the laws, we might expect just such a radical change in behavior.

correspondingly unrestrained manner. In a sense, their behavior follows from the logic of Pericles' perfectly socialized citizenry. It is not simply a refutation of Pericles' vision—it confirms the Athenians' basically unrestrained individual characters.

The plague first established increased lawlessness (*ἀνομίας*) in the city with respect to other matters. Everyone now was daring more readily to do that which they would earlier have concealed doing for pleasure, seeing the suddenness of the upheaval, both for those who had been prosperous (*εὐδαιμόνων*) and were unforeseeably dead, and of those who previously had possessed nothing suddenly coming into the property of these others. Therefore they resolved to do such as would provide quick and pleasurable satisfaction, considering their lives and property to be equally ephemeral. And no one was eager to persevere for whatever seemed noble (*καλῶ*), believing it to be unclear whether he would die before he attained it: but whatever was immediately pleasurable or in any way conducive to it was held to be both noble and useful. Indeed, fear of the gods or law of man restrained (*ἀπεῖργε*) no one. With respect to the former, they decided that it was all the same whether one worshipped or not, since they saw that all were dying equally; with respect to the latter, no one expected to be alive until a trial and to pay a penalty for his misdeeds (*ἀμάρτημα*), but that a much greater penalty had been decreed and was hanging over them, and it was only reasonable (*εἰκός*)⁸¹ to enjoy some part of their life (II.53).

The account of the plague has been read for evidence of the need for the forces of fear and hope to restrain human nature, and of the need for belief in the gods as a basis for such hope and

⁸¹ *εἰκός* in Thucydides captures a sense of what we can surmise about others, thinking about what is fair and/or probable. It could be rendered as “stands to reason.” It is one of the primary words that actors use to explain their outlook on what they think will likely happen, especially as the result of a decision. Thucydides uses it when he is making suppositions about the distant past (I.4.1, I.10.3) and the rationale for decisions throughout the war (e.g., VIII.87.4); Archidamus (I.81.6) and Pericles (I.141.6) surmise about the likely longevity of the war, while the Corinthians use the same word to claim that the war will in all likelihood be over quickly (I.121.2,4). Pericles captures both sense in his final speech: he uses the word to capture both that the Athenians are reasonable to want to protect their honor (II.63.1), but also that the enemy is behaving predictably in laying waste to Attica (II.64.1).

fear.⁸² But the above passage indicates that part of the problem is precisely these supposedly restraining forces. It is because people are already receiving what appears to them to be divine punishment that they act in such a way as to deserve the punishment. They observe the changed circumstances and reason about this change, and then they behave in a way that is technically consistent with their beliefs, even if not with the usual expression or spirit of those beliefs. When Thucydides writes “fear of the gods or law of man restrained no one” he is not describing a moment of mass disbelief in the gods and irrational disregard for possible punishments.

Thucydides is careful to show us how their actions were reasoned: the gods are clearly already punishing them, and given that a death penalty had been decreed, it would be only reasonable to act, so to speak, as if there were no tomorrow. Their actions might seem to the reader to be unhinged, but are the result of rational assessments of the circumstances, of the likely lack of legal consequences for misbehavior, of a desire to enjoy life as much as possible in what little time likely remained, and, most importantly, of a belief that the gods exist and must be punishing them to such a degree that any additional misdeeds could hardly make their position worse.

Within a religious belief system that taught that divine benevolence or malevolence manifested in this life more than the next, such thinking is not necessarily unreasonable, nor is it indicative of a disbelief in the gods. To put the point in modern language, the Athenians behavior during the plague could be described as a satire of rationality under conditions of short time horizons.

The main lesson to be drawn from the plague narrative, then, is not that humans are driven by irrational forces that are ever threatening to break free from the frail constraints of laws

⁸² Orwin, *Humanity*, 173, 182. Palmer summarizes the lesson: “...fear of the gods, obedience to human and divine laws, and the moderation and stability required for these to flourish, are requisites of decent political life.” “Love of Glory and the Common Good,” 833-5.

and norms, but that humans are rationally self-interested even in the most extreme times, and that this is often the cause of their most destructive behavior. The limitless rationalism of Pericles must be read within the context not only of his own failure in the narrative, but within the apparent Thucydidean distrust of human reason more generally. Pericles combines faith in reason with faith in the adequacy of social mores to channel and restrain human behavior. Thucydides takes aim at both in his explanation of the behavior during the plague. *Nomoi* are fragile, and when they are disrupted, it is unrestrained reason that causes social discord. The relation between individual virtue and social context emerges as a problem: if people behave only as well as their context dictates, and social contexts are always fragile, then how can we ever hope to protect against social disintegration as circumstances worsen? Will people always behave as badly as their circumstances dictate is in their self-interest?

In Thucydides' account, the belief that one can make sense of what happens and what will happen can make people behave self-destructively. Thucydides is not revealing the depravity of human nature, but the depraved behavior that results from the human tendency to try to act rationally in keeping with our beliefs. In times of crisis perhaps the most dangerous belief that we can have is that everything happens for a reason. And in light of this dilemma, Thucydides does not see devotion to *nomos* as a cure-all, because reason will always redirect such devotion towards self-serving ends. Especially when law-enforcement and social strictures are loosened, the human tendency to pursue self-interest rationally contributes to self-destructive behavior, as each individual loses sight of any common good.

In times of great stress, rationally optimized pursuit of self-interest becomes antisocial and destructive. We see this in Thucydides' comment on the Athenian political leaders who

followed Pericles (II.65.10-11) who are willing to harm the city to advance their careers (VI.28.2). Against these selfish and unrestrained leaders, however, Thucydides shows the ordinary Athenian citizen exercise admirable restraint in the face of an oligarchic coup, and are willing to compromise on the rule of the *demos* in order to preserve the city as a whole (VIII.94-7). In this context, the Athenians do not act in fear of the laws, which have, in point of fact, broken down. Rather, they take an expansive view of their own interest and serve the city as a means towards self-preservation. Thucydides expresses great admiration for the Athenians' behavior and gumption after the Sicilian disaster (VIII.1.3) and at least some of it seems to arise from his sense that the Athenians were more virtuous and restrained, after their comeuppance in Sicily, than anyone had any right to expect they would be. The disaster seems to have left them chastened but more committed to the city than ever. Preserving the city in the face of long odds inspires a different kind of thinking and requires a different kind of virtue than the imperial acquisitions of the earlier books. It is not a Periclean faith in their capacity to guarantee acquisitions abroad and perfection at home, but an awareness of their vulnerability and a focus on avoiding worst possible outcomes that prompts the Athenians' finest hour.

The alternative to Pericles' unrestrained rationalism and utopian domestic vision appears to be an awareness of the limitations of human ability to achieve ideal outcomes, and an inculcation of self-restraint through such an awareness. If citizens are aware of their limitations, they will behave in a more restrained manner even in the absence of strong legal constraints.

Pericles' faith in the beneficent power of rational self-interest and his corresponding dismissal of self-restraint as an individual virtue clearly differs from Thucydides' own view.⁸³ But there is a concern with citizenship common to both that bears emphasizing. Pericles' vision of a perfected society that flourishes through individual self-expression is designed to motivate citizens to see that their self-interest is the same as the common good.⁸⁴ Thucydides shares with Pericles an understanding of the anti-social behavior of self-interested individuals as basic problem of political life. The entitled and well-educated young men of means who numbered Alcibiades among them and who jockeyed for influence after Pericles' death exemplified the consequences of a citizenship (or at least an elite) who saw their good and the city's good as separate and possibly contradictory.⁸⁵ In Thucydides' telling, such would-be rulers are the primary menace to the well-being of Athens. In the service of their ambition they are always willing to harm the city, even to the point of inviting foreign interference.⁸⁶

⁸³ It has been noted before that Thucydides sees the forces of nature to be more powerful than the fragile social norms that seek to contain them. For an exploration of Thucydides' place in the *nomos-phusis* debate, see Saxonhouse, who situates Thucydides in the tradition of Antiphon as a believer in the primacy of *phusis* over *nomos*. "Nature and Convention in Thucydides' History" *Polity* 10, no. 4 (Summer, 1978): 461-487. As explained above, I take Thucydides to be indicating a consequence of the relative power of *phusis* over *nomos*, which is that *nomos* cannot serve as a replacement for self-generated individual virtue.

⁸⁴ A value expressed in Plato, *Republic*, III 412d.

⁸⁵ This is most famously true of Alcibiades and his narcissism, but even the pious aristocrat Nicias fails insofar as he intentionally offers bad advice to the Assembly (VI.19.2) and then allows his fear of personal retribution to influence his military strategic decisions (VII.48).

⁸⁶ We see his disdain for the ruling class who follow Pericles (II.65), for the elites who are happy to give Cleon a generalship in the hopes that he is killed while leading the army to defeat (IV.28.5), for those elite rivals of Alcibiades who undermine the Sicilian Expedition (VI.28), in the reign of terror of the 400 (VII.63.70), and in the oligarchs' willingness to turn the city over to Sparta in order to save their own skins (VIII.91.92).

Alternatively, we know (largely from other historical sources) that elite citizens of the late 5th-century were often guilty of the opposite extreme of self-interested behavior: out of distaste for the newly empowered *demos*, they would avoid political life altogether.⁸⁷ Pericles in his funeral oration hints at this problem when he claims that Athens is unique among cities for holding that those who refrain from participation are “not quiet (*ἀπράγμονα*), but useless (*ἀχρεῖον*)” (II.40.2). In denigrating those elites who considered themselves to be justified quietists, Pericles diverges from other elite sources who treat the *apragmon* as a noble figure.⁸⁸ Thucydides likely is sympathetic to this stance, as there is every reason to believe that he was deeply committed to public service. He was forcibly removed from politics in Athens after serving as a general and being banished. His keen personal and historical interest in Athenian politics would make little sense if he thought public life beneath him. And his recurring focus on the failures of leadership at Athens implies a belief that if the most influential citizens had better served the city rather than themselves, they could have changed the course of the war.

Conclusion

In the rhetoric and reasoning of foreign policy, this chapter has argued that Thucydides sees the Athenians’ failures of decision-making and persuasion as rooted in a misguided overconfidence

⁸⁷ Connor has shown the extent to which the politics of Pericles and then of Cleon marked a new avenue towards power that rejected the elite networks of friends and family in favor of direct appeals to the people. As a result a new rhetoric emerges as well as a new style of politicking that involved ingratiation to the people in the Assembly. Elite reaction to these new politicians and their methods was often a disgusted withdrawal from politics. *The New Politicians of Fifth-Century Athens*, 175. Cf. L.B. Carter, *The Quiet Athenian*, chaps. 2 and 5.

⁸⁸ Carter notes that this is the only instance of the *apragmones* being spoken of in a derogatory way. *The Quiet Athenian*, 192.

in their capacities of reason. They hold to the fallacy that reason conquers all, and that they are the best at reasoning. Their hubristic rationalism is overly narrow and extreme and invites disaster. Their failures show the need for an awareness that reason cannot mitigate chance, that narrow appeals to reason are unlikely to be persuasive to others, and that success can be guaranteed through calculation. The Periclean and Athenian confidence in reason is revealed to be unfounded and therein irrational. Against such disastrous overestimation Thucydides' perspective is not that we should despair of reason or that we require religious devotion to restrain us, but that a truly rational perspective is one of humility and prudent circumspection in the face of the unknown. In the language of war planning, one might compare this point to Clausewitz's notion that "friction" of real events has cannot be fully accounted for and can confound even the best-laid plans.⁸⁹ Similarly, the optimistic Periclean rationalism in domestic affairs is ironized not only by the social disintegration of the plague, but also by the rational motivations that citizens have for their anti-social behavior—they behave as rational agents under extremely short time horizons. If the Athenians were less confident in their rationality they may have avoided such a degree of catastrophe at home and abroad.

Bernard Williams contrasts two modes of thinking in Western thought—the rationalizing mode of those who find "a pattern that makes sense of human life and human aspirations," which is exemplified by thinkers from Plato to Aristotle to Kant to Hegel. The other he locates in Sophocles and Thucydides:

Each of them represents human beings as dealing sensibly, foolishly, sometimes catastrophically, sometimes nobly, with a world that is only partially intelligible to human agency and in itself is not necessarily well adjusted to ethical aspirations. In this

⁸⁹ Carl von Clausewitz, *On War*, ed. and trans. Michael Howard and Peter Paret (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1976), I.7.

perspective the difference between a Sophoclean obscurity of fate and Thucydides' sense of rationality at risk to chance is not so significant.⁹⁰

Characterizing Thucydides as somehow a “realist” and Plato as a “utopian” has become commonplace since Nietzsche professed his preference for Thucydides over Plato because of his “unconditional will not to be fooled and to see reason in *reality*, —*not* in ‘reason’, and even less in ‘morality’ ...⁹¹ But contrasting the rationalistic utopian thinking of Pericles with Thucydides’ thematic presentation of the fragility of society and the dangers of untrammelled rationalism shows us that this reading may draw too sharp a contrast between Thucydides and the philosophic tradition. Thucydides does not refrain from assessing the world according to a rational standard. Rather, he combines observation with reasoning to show us the extremes to which *seemingly* rational thinking can lead us. He is opposed to irrational confidence masquerading as reason, not to reasoning as such. The tendency of human beings to misunderstand the scope of reason and to undermine the common good in their calculated pursuit of self-interest is a feature of human nature that transcends Thucydides’ moment. Thucydides’ implicit critique of Pericles’ hubristic faith in reason requires precisely a “pattern that makes sense of human life and human aspirations,” against which Pericles and the Athenians can be measured.⁹²

⁹⁰ Bernard Williams, *Shame and Necessity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), 163-164.

⁹¹ Friedrich Nietzsche, *Twilight of the Idols*, ed. Aaron Ridley and Judith Norman (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 225. More recently, Cynthia Farrar has read Plato’s *Laws* as in dialogue with Thucydides to reaffirm the basic difference that Williams dwells on. “Putting history in its place: Plato, Thucydides, and the Athenian *politeia*,” in *Politeia in Greek and Roman Philosophy*, ed. Verity Harte (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2013).

⁹² Williams, *Shame and Necessity*, 163.

More broadly, this study seeks to show how the utopianism of Periclean Athens should be taken as a defining context that provides meaning to Thucydides' text. The historical fact of a time when Athens was ascendant and was led by a man whose vision of Athens' perfection led to catastrophe set the stage for Thucydides' writing, as well as that of his younger contemporary Plato. Rather than read Thucydides as a representative of the Greek enlightenment, we should read him as driven by a desire to respond not only to the heady promise of the scientific and philosophic movements of his time, but also to the image of a glorious imperial past which, in his telling, contained the seeds of its own destruction. Emily Greenwood has recently suggested this contextualized reading of Plato, building on much work of the last several decades that have rescued Plato from charges of anti-pluralistic and anti-democratic politics. While Karl Popper read Plato to be building a utopian politics as a response to the pluralism of democratic Athens, Greenwood argues that Pericles' funeral oration shows precisely such a utopian kind of thought and rhetoric at the head of the democracy.⁹³ Plato can be read as responding to a dangerously idealistic and utopian mode of reasoning, and in this, at least, aligning with Thucydides.⁹⁴

Pericles' faith in the perfectibility of social life goes hand in hand with his faith in human reasoning to overcome all obstacles, and, by extension, his faith in the superior reasoning of the Athenian empire to overcome all enemies. Pericles' confidence in limitless reason is shared by the Athenians long after his death, such that it is fair to consider even the decision to launch the Sicilian Expedition as an expression of the same distorted thinking. The Athenians' confidence

⁹³ Greenwood, "Pericles' Utopia," 76. Cf. Malcolm Schofield, *Plato: Political Philosophy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006).

⁹⁴ On the reading of Plato as cautioning against utopian politics, rather than endorsing and explicating their instantiation, see Leo Strauss, *The City and Man*.

in their powers of reasoning contrasts sharply with Thucydides' account of various outcomes, speaking to Thucydides' view on the scope of human control. Thucydides' critique of Pericles is of a hubristic leader's fallacious confidence in the power of reason to predict and control outcomes. Thucydides is not, therefore advocating for religious or moral belief as an extrarational constraint, nor is he best understood as a "realist" in opposition to a philosopher's use of reason. Rather, his commitment to reason leads him to an awareness that the self-interested use of reason can guarantee neither success against enemies abroad nor the proper functioning of social norms at home. The key point for understanding Thucydides on human nature and behavior is that passions are not simply restrained by reason, ever threatening to break loose under pressure.⁹⁵ While there are certainly constant needs and desires, it is rather the calculated pursuit of satisfying those needs that leads to the most destructive behavior. Social structures cannot sustain order if individual citizens lack the virtue of prudent self-restraint resulting from an understanding of the negative consequences of pursuing their interests to the detriment of other citizens'.⁹⁶

Thucydides demonstrates that grand attempts to persuade citizens of the perfection of their city and its mores can ironically contribute to their anti-social behavior once the usual constraints no longer obtain. Citizens will always believe that they can understand their self-

⁹⁵ This is the dominant reading of Thucydides, perhaps built on the association between him and Hobbes. See Orwin, who refers to "natural compulsions that law is powerless to contain." *Humanity*, 173. Cf. Paul A. Rahe, "Thucydides' Critique of Realpolitik," 134; Peter Pouncey, *The Necessities of War: A Study of Thucydides' Pessimism* (Rhinebeck, New York: Sheep Meadow Press, 2013), ix-x.

⁹⁶ In some sense Thucydides anticipates Alexis de Tocqueville's notion of "self-interest properly understood," although it is a largely negative proposition for Thucydides. *Democracy in America*, trans. Arthur Goldhammer (New York: Library of America, 2004), Vol. II., 2.8.

interest; their reasoned pursuit of it in accordance with their customary beliefs about the gods and the laws can contribute to the very social deterioration that such beliefs are supposed to prevent. Both in domestic politics and in international affairs, it is faith in reason that leads the Athenians astray. Only a self-restraint born of individual humility and tempered expectations could guard against such disaster.

Chapter 3

The Third Fallacy: Character as Destiny

Introduction

This chapter examines collective character as a topic of deliberation in Thucydides. Speakers often justify their proposals as expressions of collective character, a line of thought that I argue lends itself to poor decision-making. If a people believes that their character is simply identifiable with established practice, and if they further believe that they must act in a characteristic way without interrogating the meaning of that character, then they are losing sight of their capacity to change and are likely headed for disaster. They are falling prey to the deterministic fallacy that character is destiny.

In this chapter I seek to establish that collective (or national) character, for Thucydides, is changeable through the processes of public deliberation; further, because people often misunderstand their character as a fixed trait, the rhetoric of character in moments of public decision-making is often dangerous. In this study I do not wish to assert that character is merely constructed and is not formed by factors such as economics, technology, or human nature—merely that moments of collective decision-making are formative and are a key factor, among others, in the development of national character according to Thucydides. There is an element of free choice in a people's character. Thucydides' repeated inclusion of speeches in which peoples invoke their own and others' national character is intended to show us how self-reinforcing beliefs about character are. The insight is not a tragic point that people are entrapped by irrational predispositions, but a more productive insight that they entrap themselves through their erroneous ways of speaking and thinking about character. The Athenians, we might say, make

their worst decisions not so much because of their daring character, but because of their fallacious belief that they are bound by their character.

Rather than offering a determinist understanding of character, Thucydides indicates that character can and should be the starting point for open-ended negotiation of a collective story. Healthy deliberation does not seek ways to justify present actions as an extension of established character, but rather seeks ways to improve upon what came before. In this analysis, collective character is not a static trait, but a set of changing dispositions shaped not only by external conditions, but by beliefs.¹ Good advisers do not seek to dictate authoritatively the meaning of the people's character, but invite their audience to become participants in a process of identity formation. Audience deliberation requires an active engagement with the question of who they are and who they ought to be.² A people's sense of their own character may influence their decision-making, but it is also the case that decision-making serves to affirm or revise their story, and therein their character.

¹ As John Zumbrennen puts it: "Speakers in the *History* do not merely draw on their knowledge of the character of audiences to shape their speeches, they use their speeches to try to shape the audience's understanding of that character." "Democratic Politics and the 'Character' of the City in Thucydides," *History of Political Thought* 23, no. 4 (Winter 2002): 578. Zumbrennen draws on Hannah Arendt to analyze character in Thucydides as collective action, rather than a fixed trait. I take a different approach in that I hope to compare and evaluate the claims made by various speakers, while Zumbrennen sees all such claims as fundamentally inconclusive in the face of the silent audience

² Walter R. Fisher argues that from a narrative perspective, "the audience is not a group of observers but are active participants in the meaning-formation of the stories." "Narration as a Human Communication Paradigm: The Case of the Public Moral Argument," *Communication Monographs* 51 (March 1984): 13. Recent efforts to understand decision-making through narratives of self-understanding include Robert J. Schiller, *Narrative Economics* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2019) and in the field of psychology, William B. Swann, "Self-verification: Bringing social reality into harmony with the self," in *Psychological Perspectives on the Self*, ed. J. Suls and A. G. Greenwald (Hillsdale, NJ: Erlbaum, 1983).

Scholarly examinations of collective character in Thucydides generally take their cue from the Corinthians' speech comparing the Athenians and the Spartans (I.70).³ There the Corinthians speak of the Athenians and the Spartans as if their character is set in stone. The Corinthians claim that while the Athenians are naturally daring beyond their means, the Spartans are always overly cautious. As a result of their characteristic difference, the Spartans underestimate their enemy. The Corinthian summary of the daringness of Athenian character is vindicated by the later narrative and Thucydides' direct authorial assessment (VIII.96.5), but it is importantly a third-person observation. From the Corinthian perspective, national character is static. Within Athens and Sparta, however, we see character defined and invoked during moments of decision-making that could have many outcomes. Character does not so much dictate their actions as inform their deliberations. The following chapter will look to these moments of decision-making that feature the language of character. Because it is not a deliberative speech, Pericles' funeral oration will not be a focus on this chapter. Although it takes place before a home crowd and is an effort to shape Athenian self-understanding and self-confidence during the war, it does not illuminate the direct connection between choice and character.

Domestic deliberations show us an authentic connection between discussions of collective character and the decisions reached. Although many scholars have read the speeches for insight into the character of the audiences, they have been surprisingly quiet on character as a

³ Robert D. Luginbill reads the entire text as a vindication of the Corinthian assessment. His broader reading is a prime example of the tendency to read national character as a static factor: "The national character of the Athenians and Spartans...have been reinforced and locked in place under the pressure of traumatic events." *Thucydides on War and National Character* (Boulder: Westview, 1999), 74-5.

subject of deliberation, preferring instead to consider character as something existing outside of deliberation.⁴ I propose that it is essential to understanding the reasonableness of these decisions that they include deliberation about collective character before a domestic audience.

In focusing on the explicit discussion of collective character, this chapter will serve as a counterpoint to the scholarship that considers collective character as rooted in historical or material factors outside of a people's control. For example, Steven Forde has taken the Athenian character to be set by their experience against Persia.⁵ S.N. Jaffe has argued that for Thucydides, collective character is essentially an extension of the natural human necessities that drives nations into conflict. What seems necessary to an Athenian or a Spartan will depend on their collective character—effectively their character gets in the way of rational appraisal of their self-interest: “Each city is ensnared by different psychological necessity.”⁶ These readings reduce collective character to an inevitability, as if it were a physical constraint.⁷ What I propose is that the scenes of deliberation in Thucydides have such pride of place because they are moments of real choice, with the meaning of the collective character—or what one could call the collective story—at stake.

⁴ Marc Cogan, for example, takes an approach of assuming that speakers are constantly tailoring their messages around the character of their audience, but does not acknowledge the importance of the fact that this is often explicitly the topic of debate. *The Human Thing*, 203. Cf. Ober and Perry, “Thucydides as Prospect Theorist,” 224-225.

⁵ Steven Forde, “Thucydides on the Causes of Athenian Imperialism,” *The American Political Science Review* 80, no. 2 (1986): 433-48.

⁶ S.N. Jaffe, *Thucydides on the Outbreak of War: Character and Contest*, 158, 197, 19.

⁷ Thus, Jaffe refers to local character as a type of “irrationality,” while arguing that in Thucydides’ account it is “the figure of the statesman, who moderates, shapes, and appeals to the inclinations of his fellows in order to realize the advantageous things for his city.” *Ibid.*, 189, 205. Cf. Cogan, who reduces character to “extrarational particularities” in contrast with “logical activity.” *The Human Thing*, 201.

The assumption motivating this reading is that it is reasonable for people to act in accordance with their character. Another way of putting this is that people should do what they are good at and what makes sense to them, given their self-knowledge based on their past experiences. When people share a collective set of experiences, and they have to make decisions about what to do, they need to make sense of their current or future actions in the light of their past.⁸ This process is similar to constructing a story, where we link one chapter to the next and make sense of what follows by way of what came before.

A note on the relevant Greek terms: in Thucydides' text the most common word to express character is *tropos*. While translators have often navigated these distinctions by assigning *tropos* a natural origin, as if one is born with a defined *tropos*, I think this has been largely misguided. This word literally means turning, or way.⁹ Its modern English derivative is trope. A way can have a certain past but an uncertain future, and does not imply necessity or natural constraint. Just as a literary trope can be the starting point of creative storytelling, a people's *tropos* should be understood as familiar way of acting that does not close off other ways of acting. *Tropos* is not the only relevant word, however. When discussing character, speakers also make references to customs (*nomoi*), habits (*epitēdeumata*), or disposition (*ēthos*). I will treat references to all of these terms as referring to customary rather than natural behavior, and will not stake any part of my argument on a strong distinction between these terms.

This investigation below begins with short examination of the role of Theseus in creating Athenian political identity, a digression in Thucydides that shows how the institutional spaces of

⁸ For some discussion of the related idea of “narrative rationality,” see John O’Neill, *The Market: Ethics, Knowledge and Politics* (New York: Routledge, 1998), 51, 79, 126; Fisher, “Narration as a Human Communication Paradigm,” 1-22.

⁹ See Liddell, Scott, and Jones, *A Greek-English Lexicon*.

public decision-making shape the self-understanding of a people and is a precondition for the development of a collective character. Then I look to the Sicilian Debate, highlighting Alcibiades' deterministic rhetoric of collective character as a parallel to Xerxes' self-justification in Herodotus. I then read the speeches of Archidamus, Pericles, Hermocrates, and Diodotus to show that appeals to collective character can take healthier forms, and that it is the role of a speaker not simply to oppose foolishness but to suggest alternatives that make sense as part of a narrative of collective character. I then consider Thucydides' interest in the Athenians' misconceptions about the historical figures Harmodius and Aristogeiton, to show a broader problem of facile parallels between past and present. I conclude with an examination of Thucydides' treatment of Themistocles as a predecessor of Pericles whose decisions changed the Athenians' collective character. Thucydides admires Themistocles as a leader who understood that character should be creatively redefined rather than defied or acquiesced to.

The celebration of Theseus: Transformation through Public Gathering

Before investigating the role of character in the speeches, it should be noted that Thucydides' origin story of Athens demonstrates that the very nature of the city depends on the practices of public deliberation. One of Thucydides' more striking engagements with Athenian history is his linking the metropolitan focus of Athenian democracy to the mythic founder of Athens, Theseus. This passage comes after the first speech of Pericles, where he articulates a strategy of restraint and avoiding land battles from within the walls of the city. Thucydides mentions in an off-hand remark that the move to the city was difficult, as many of the Athenians were from the countryside and did not have homes in the city, but that since the time of Theseus the metropolitan area had been the political center of Athenian life.

Under Cecrops and the first kings until the time of Theseus, Attica was inhabited by cities that had their own magistrate's hall (πρυτανεία) and officials, and unless they were in fear of something they did not come together to deliberate before the king, but each practiced their own politics and deliberated among themselves... But when Theseus was king, combining power with intelligence, in addition to reorganizing the country in other respects, he abolished the councils and offices of the other cities in favor of the current city, designating one council chamber (βουλευτήριον) and public hall (πρυτανεῖον), brought them all to live together (ξυνώκισε); while each continued to possess their own land, as before, he forced them to make use of this as their one city—which (once they all paid taxes to it) became the great [city] handed down by Theseus to those who followed (II.15.1-2).

Since Thucydides' celebration of Theseus comes immediately after Pericles' first speech, it is striking how little the secondary literature has dwelled on it.¹⁰ For some, it is a puzzling and unsatisfying digression. In this vein, Martha Taylor sees the Theseus digression as “wholly out of place.” It comes as Thucydides is explaining why the Athenians have such difficulty relocating from the countryside to the city as part of Pericles' war strategy. But if there was indeed such a long tradition of reorienting the country to the city-center, then it would seem to follow that this digression does nothing to explain the difficulty of implementing Pericles' policy—rather, it could plausibly serve to show exactly the opposite.¹¹ Taylor concludes that the reform (the

¹⁰ For example, Connor and Hawthorn both ignore this passage in their commentary-style books. Connor, *Thucydides*; Hawthorn, *Thucydides on Politics*. John Finley merely observes that it is “an interesting digression.” *Thucydides*, 144. It is also noteworthy that here Thucydides delves into the mythic past not to correct it or deflate it, as he does with Homer by analyzing the numbers of ships and men to show it was not so significant (I.9-12), but to credit it with real importance. While Thucydides is often taken to be anti-mythical in his approach, largely based on his statement of method prioritizing accuracy over beauty (1.21-22), this passage indicates an interest in rehabilitating certain mythical figures for specific purposes; certainly it complicates any reading of simple antagonism on Thucydides' part towards the mythical. On Thucydides' productive relationship to myth, see most recently Tim Rood, “Thucydides and Myth,” in *Historical Consciousness and the Use of the Past in the Ancient World*, ed. John Baines, Henriette van der Bloom, Yi Samuel Chen, and Tim Rood (Bristol: Equinox, 2019).

¹¹ Martha Taylor, *Thucydides, Pericles, and the Idea of Athens in the Peloponnesian War*, 55.

“*synoicism*”) of Theseus is only partially successful, so Theseus should be read as a failure who “must presage failure for the civic vision” of Pericles.¹²

But it does not seem that the purpose of the Theseus digression is to demonstrate the failure of his reforms. It seems rather that Thucydides is drawn to the story of Theseus precisely because of the success and continued political relevance of those reforms. Thucydides applies very specific language of current Athenian institutional spaces to the distant past, in referring to a council chamber (*bouleuterion*) and magistrate’s hall (*prytany*).¹³ The terminology of these spaces, and the coming together into a “single city” that they accomplish, credits a mythic figure of Athens’ past with real influence on the current characteristics of their politics.¹⁴ Further, the fact that Theseus’ *synoicism* remains to some extent unfinished does not indicate failure, as Taylor reads it, so much as it shows a progression: Thucydides places Pericles on a continuum beginning in the quasi-mythical time of Theseus.¹⁵

Thucydides seems to be attracted particularly to the Theseus digression because he is revising a popular narrative. There is a marked silence on empire in the Theseus treatment. In other sources, Theseus is a figure associated with founding an independent Athens and with an image of Athens as a just and beneficent city of rightfully earned status among the Greeks.

¹² Ibid, 56.

¹³ These spaces were pre-democratic in origin, so Thucydides is not inaccurately projecting specifically democratic practices onto a pre-democratic past. Simon Hornblower notes that while it may sound “anachronistic” on Thucydides’ part, it cannot be proved to be inaccurate. *Commentary*, ad loc. Contra Mark Munn, who refers to “the knack of the Athenian myth-historical imagination...for investing innovation with the dignity of ancient tradition,” as exemplified by Theseus. *The School of History* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), 38.

¹⁴ For an extended argument on the importance of the institutional spaces of Athenian democracy for sharing the knowledge that enabled informed and cohesive collective action, see Josiah Ober, *Democracy and Knowledge* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008), 272-5 and passim.

¹⁵ Henry, J. Walker, *Theseus and Athens* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 199.

Theseus appears as a figure defending justice and enforcing moral norms among nations while taking mercy on the downtrodden in *Oedipus at Colonus* as well as Euripides' *Suppliant Women*.¹⁶ He is the hero of an outward-facing Athenian politics built on an empowered *demos* coming into its own among other nations. Thucydides, by contrast, selectively evokes a traditional figure linked with Athens' status among nations, and associates him exclusively with domestic reform of the spaces of public gathering. His selective use of this quasi-mythical figure indicates his prioritization of domestic political practices in defining Athenian identity. The suggestion is that Theseus' praiseworthy domestic focus should be contrasted with Pericles' imperial obsessions; not, as some scholars have asserted, that he "represents" Pericles as a similarly visionary "democratic monarch."¹⁷

This episode is worthy of an exceptional digression in Thucydides' telling because it explains how the political identity of the Athenians came into being, which sets the stage for subsequent development of their distinctive character. The Athenians change partially because of the insight of a leader willing to innovate, but also because the resulting structures were spaces of gathering and deliberation. The people of Attica become Athenians and gain the identity of a single great *polis* only when they gather together in common spaces to make decisions. This

¹⁶ Sophie Mills notes that Theseus in this era stands for the "idealized self-perception of democratic Athens" as a city of "persuasion, mercy, and flexibility" towards others. *Theseus, Tragedy, and the Athenian Empire* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997), 55. Cf. Lynette Mitchell, "Thucydides and the Monarch in Democracy," *Polis* 25, no. 1 (2008): 12.

¹⁷ Mills, *Theseus*, 103; Mitchell, "Thucydides and the Monarch in Democracy," 20. Reading Theseus as a simply corollary of Pericles is also problematic in light of evidence from Plutarch, whose evidence indicates that Theseus may have had partisan associations with Pericles' enemies: Cimon, leader of the aristocratic party and rival of Pericles' predecessor Ephialtes, gained his popularity by bringing relocating the bones of Theseus from the island of Scyros. *Plutarch*, "Cimon."

digression establishes a theme in the work that practices of public decision-making have transformative potential for civic identity.

Alcibiades' Rhetoric: Character as Destiny

I will now look to the rhetoric of Alcibiades and Nicias during the debate over the Sicilian Expedition to establish that they take extreme and divergent approaches to reasoning through collective character: while Alcibiades attempts to reduce the Athenians' present and past actions to a necessary expression of their character, Nicias refuses to engage with their character whatsoever. These two approaches are the poles of failure according to which one can evaluate other speakers in Thucydides' text.

Perhaps the single most disastrous collective decision in Thucydides is the Athenian decision to launch the Sicilian Expedition.¹⁸ This decision is supported by Alcibiades, whose speech features a direct appeal for the Athenians to act in accordance with their established practices, which he links to their existing character. He declares, "...if we do not have an empire over others, we are in danger of being in their empire. Nor can you regard quietude from the same perspective as others, that is unless you would transform your habits (*ἐπιτηδεύματα*) to be

¹⁸ Thucydides identifies the Sicilian Expedition as one of "many other errors... and not so much an error of judgment against whom they were sailing, but the senders not deciding to do what was suitable in support of those who were sent..." (II.65.11). What exactly Thucydides is referring to has been the subject of much debate, but a failure to follow-up appropriately seems to me to be an extension of the initial decision, insofar as it was made without committing the right resources, without choosing the right leaders, and without clarifying what the campaign was to accomplish upon its arrival in Sicily. Thucydides is emphasizing that an expedition to Sicily was not destined for disaster simply because of the Athenians' ignorance, but also required mismanagement to produce a disaster of the scale that resulted. Thucydides' emphasis here on the mismanagement of the Expedition, however, does not imply that the initial decision was not also misguided, especially given Thucydides' emphasis later on the Athenians' extreme ignorance about Sicily (VI.1).

similar to theirs...” (VI.18.3).¹⁹ He combines a claim to historical continuity with a claim about national character. In Alcibiades’ formulation, if they want to continue to be Athenians, they need to take action in a characteristically Athenian way.

The story that Alcibiades tells of Athens is entirely consistent with their present behavior to other Greek cities. As he tells it, the Athenians have always responded to requests for intervention from local cities so that they can absorb them into their empire. He begins by mentioning the oaths that they swore to defend their allies in Sicily, but immediately makes clear that the reason to honor their oaths is the expansion of their empire: “This is how we acquired our empire—and how others do so as well” (VI.18.2). His exhortation to the pursuit of empire is thus framed as a continuation of traditional practices. The Athenians should simply continue to do what they have done in the past; they need to attack Sicily because that is who they are and who they always have been:

...in the customary order (εἰωθότι κόσμῳ) by which our fathers...raised affairs to their present state, try now with the same character (τρόπῳ) to raise the city higher... I judge it to be absolutely the case that in my opinion a city that is not [in its character] inactive will be destroyed very quickly by the change to inactivity, and that the most secure of men are those who live according to their existing dispositions (ἤθησι) and customs (νόμοις); even if they were imperfect, they would practice their politics with the least division (VI.18.7).

It seems unambiguous that Thucydides sees the Sicilian Expedition as catastrophically misguided, and Alcibiades’ support of this policy is unscrupulous and self-interested.

Nonetheless, Alcibiades’ exhortation that the Athenians be true to their character is not obviously

¹⁹ In this sentiment he strikingly echoes the demagogue Cleon, who reminds the Athenians that they are in constant danger from unwilling subjects (III.37.2).

without merit.²⁰ If their success was built on a certain kind of daring, and they want to continue to reach for a similar kind of success, then there is something to be said for making the characteristically daring choice. It is certainly not surprising that Alcibiades is persuasive enough to carry the day.

It would be too simple then, to conclude (as many scholars have) that the Athenians are simply irrational in this moment.²¹ Explaining their catastrophic decision to invade Sicily as a moment of uncontrollable passion overcoming the forces of reason neglects the fact that Alcibiades has a clear line of reasoning, which appeals to a coherent self-understanding of Athens as daring go-getters.²² These speeches show not that the people are irrational or that they are simply manipulated by an unscrupulous and demagogic speaker, but that their decision to invade Sicily made a certain kind of sense given their self-understanding.

So what exactly is wrong with Alcibiades' rhetoric? The most obvious objection might be to its deterministic force. He reduces a narrative reason to its barest form: *we should do this because it is who we are and who we always have been*. His version of reasoning with narrative is to tell the simplest version of the Athenian story, rhetorically committing what Macleod calls an "assimilation of past and present."²³ The Athenians will be successful if they keep doing what

²⁰ Much hinges on this, perhaps most important of which is the question of the wisdom of Pericles' policy of military restraint—if indeed nations should be true to their character and the Athenians are characteristically active and daring, then perhaps Pericles can be faulted for saddling them with a strategy poorly suited to their character. See Jaffe, *Thucydides on the Outbreak of War*, 189.

²¹ For the most incisive reading that emphasizes power of the irrational in this moment, see Stahl, "Herodotus and Thucydides on Blind Decisions Preceding Military Action."

²² He also seems to have a plausible strategy for the Sicilian Expedition, focused on long-term coalition-building (VI.48), although he does not share such details with the Assembly.

²³ Colin Macleod notes that Alcibiades turns the rhetorical "stock-in-trade" of referencing the greatness of one's ancestors into a claim of complete continuity with them. "Rhetoric and History," in *Collected Essays*, 80, 84.

they are good at, which is choosing activity over passivity and thus making war rather than peace.

Notably, Alcibiades' rhetoric is not particularly traditional, despite his appeals to established practice. For Alcibiades, identity is defined by actions, not by kinship or religious belief. To this point, Alcibiades' does not see ethnic identity as particularly important in predicting the behavior of the Sicilians (VI.11); he does not mention autochthony or any ties of kinship that might be expected to feature in a speech that invokes what it means to be Athenian. In explaining Athens' approach to other nations he even rejects the importance of their status as Greeks (VI.18).²⁴

Above all, the reader might wonder why the Athenians are so taken with a narrative of Athens' growth that takes Athens as fundamentally opportunistic imperialists. Alcibiades praises them for the capacity to inflict harm and to accrue power: they will either become "rulers of all of Greece" or "at least do bad things (κακώσομέν) to the Syracusans" (VI.18.4). This reminds us of Pericles' statement in the funeral oration that the Athenians will leave "memorials of good and bad things" (II.41.4), but Alcibiades does not use the vocabulary of good things, only power and advantage. Pericles had told a different story of Athens, and had insisted on their being a "model for others" (II.37.1) and an "education for Greece" (II.41.1) as a uniquely beneficent power: "we alone fearlessly help others, not so much out of calculation of advantage but in the confidence of our freedom" (II.40.5). Pericles praises the prior generations who acquired the empire, but he tempers this with praise of the even earlier generation who made Athens "free through their

²⁴ Noted by Per Jansson, "Identity-defining Practices in Thucydides' *History of the Peloponnesian War*," *European Journal of International Relations* 3, no. 2: 157.

virtue” (II.36.2). Where Pericles gave a nuanced account of Athens, including values of freedom as well as empire, Alcibiades’ account is flat and uncomplicated.²⁵

Alcibiades’ uncomplicated rhetoric shows the particular dangers of vague invocations of established character in deliberative settings. Speakers who are pushing a particular agenda will be selective with the past events that they invoke, and they will do so in service of a simplistic account of the audience’s collective character. Pericles, by contrast, largely avoids discussing the Athenians’ character as defined by their past. Alcibiades realizes that when making decisions about war and empire, there is necessarily an underlying claim of identity—a people cannot decide to go to war without answering the questions of who they are as a community and what end they hope to achieve by doing so. Alcibiades’ answers to these questions may seem shockingly bleak to the reader, but they are astute and rhetorically effective.

So the problem that Alcibiades’ rhetoric presents to us is not that he infuses questions of policy with questions of character—in some sense policy is necessarily infused with character. The problem is that the story he tells the Athenians about themselves is deficient. He looks to a vague and selective version of their past as a source of simple continuity with the present and future, and he distills the relatively nuanced account of Pericles into a brutally simple account of the Athenian story as the pursuit of power. This authoritative reduction of character into destiny can only have the effect of distracting the audience from the details of the expedition under

²⁵ David Gribble argues that Alcibiades happens to be persuasive because his selfishness mirrors the increasing selfishness of the Athenians: he is “an outstanding example of a wider pattern of Athenian political decay.” *Alcibiades and Athens* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1999), 204, 212. While it is true that Thucydides places great emphasis on Alcibiades’ stature and his worrisome pursuit of status, such traits actually make the people suspicious of him. The persuasiveness of his speech for Sicily should be separated from his personal standing, just as the Athenians were quick to separate the Expedition from his leadership.

consideration and of discrediting any speaker who seeks to oppose it as somehow opposing what it means to be Athenian. Nonetheless, he understands the importance of some engagement with the question of character. He offers the Athenians a version of their story that makes sense to them, and they seem to embrace it. We know from Thucydides' account of the pre-war years that the Athenians engaged in reckless expeditions far from home, most notably their catastrophic invasion of Egypt (I.109-10) that ended thirty-six years earlier. It is not unlikely that a trip to Sicily felt to the Athenians like a return to the heady days of adventure that they indulged in before the Peloponnesian War crimped their style. This nostalgic appeal, however, requires losing sight of any productive lessons based on the Egyptian Expedition, which was one of Athens' greatest defeats. Reducing character to destiny, as Alcibiades does, entails failing to learn any lessons from past setbacks.

Alcibiades and Xerxes

The problem of looking to one's own past in a simple and deterministic way is not unique to the Athenians. By reading Thucydides in conversation with Herodotus, one can identify such thinking as a common characteristic of overbearing imperial powers in Greek thought.

Alcibiades' rhetoric bears a striking similarity with Xerxes' justification for invading Greece, and thus speaks to the deliberative challenges common to imperial powers.

It is now widely acknowledged that Herodotus' wrote his *Histories* with the inter-Greek conflicts of the time in mind.²⁶ The Athenian decision to invade Sicily clearly parallels Xerxes'

²⁶ Sara Forsdyke, "Herodotus, Political History and Political Thought," in *The Cambridge Companion to Herodotus*, ed. Carolyn Dewald and John Marincola (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 227-8. C.W. Fornara, *Herodotus: An Interpretive Essay* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1971).

decision to invade Greece, such that we can assume that Thucydides crafted his scene to resonate with the Persian invasion.²⁷ There is a parallel in general terms, as the Athenians are like the Persians—an imperial aggressor fighting against a democratic Greek city that chooses to resist rather than capitulate.²⁸ There is also a parallel in the specificities of the scenes of decision and of embarkation. Both scenes feature extravagant expeditions viewed by spectating rulers; both scenes feature rulers (Xerxes and the Athenian *demos*) driven by powerful urges; at the moment of departure both scenes feature poignant but foreboding libations from golden vessels and ships racing each other; and both expeditions to distant lands end with decisive defeat and humiliation in a battle dramatically viewed from the shore.²⁹ Most pertinently to our investigation, both sequences feature a clash of speakers advising for and against the expedition with similar results, in a scene of open deliberation. In both cases, the final catastrophe is set in motion by deliberative shortcomings.³⁰ Even the specifics of the advisers' profiles in the preceding deliberations have something in common—an older wiser adviser figure opposes the expedition

²⁷ This is not to claim that he directly modeled the scene off of Herodotus—it is possible they had a shared set of sources that they both drew on without one directly influencing the other. But the parallels illustrate that the resonances of the scene were likely ominous. Kurt Raaflaub, “Herodot und Thukidides: Persischer Imperialismus im Lichte der athenischen Sizilienpolitik,” in *Widerstand—Anpassung—Integration. Die griechische Staatenwelt und Rom* (Stuttgart: Steiner, 2002).

²⁸ Stahl, *Man's Place in History*, 49. Connor, *Thucydides*, 175.

²⁹ Cornford, *Thucydides Mythistoricus*, 201-220. Rood, “Thucydides' Persian Wars,” in *The Limits of Historiography*, ed. Christina Shuttleworth Kraus (Boston: Brill, 1999), 152-159. Lebow, *The Tragic Vision of Politics*, 135.

³⁰ The consensus has long been that Herodotus' depiction of Xerxes' War Council is intended to show its deficiencies, in contrast with the Greeks' practice of freedom. Lombardini, “Isonomia' and the Public Sphere in Democratic Athens,” 412. Christopher Pelling labels it a “travesty” of a debate, “Speech and Action: Herodotus' Debate on the Constitutions,” *Proceedings of the Cambridge Philological Society* 48 (2002): 124. By contrast, Matthew Landauer has explored the debate as a productive analogy to the Greeks. *Dangerous Counsel*, 95.

as rash and poorly thought out, while a younger self-interested adviser is more interested in flattering the ruler than in giving good advice.³¹

The key similarity, for the purposes of the present argument, is that Xerxes' initial justification for launching his expedition parallels Alcibiades' rhetoric before the Athenian people. Besides crediting the gods with the impetus for the expedition, Xerxes invokes past Persians, and his desire to maintain continuity with them, as his justification:

Men of Persia, I am not innovating or establishing a new law among you; rather as an inheritor I am putting it to use. For, as I have been told by the elders, since we succeeded to the hegemony from the Medes when Cyrus overthrew Astyages never yet have we kept still. But the god drives us on in this way and from these same pursuits many things have resulted to our benefit. No one need tell you, who know it well, that Cyrus and Cambyses and my father Darius conquered peoples and added them to what we now have. And I, ever since I succeeded to this throne, have thought over how I will not fall short of earlier generations in this honor and to add no less to the power of the Persians...(VII.8a).³²

Xerxes' claim not to be an innovator, but to be merely consistent with established practice, resonates with various Athenian speakers in Thucydides who value continuity over change. In addition to Alcibiades' claim to historical-cultural continuity, Cleon famously denigrates the Athenians' merciful change of heart towards the Mytileneans while celebrating his own harsh consistency (III.38.1), and, as I argued in chapter one, Pericles' celebration of his own consistency revealingly linked him to Cleon. Perhaps most distastefully, the Athenians at Melos justify their aggression towards the innocent Melians as normal practice—people have always behaved this way, and the Melians would do the same if the situation were reversed: “Of the

³¹ On the similarity between the wise adviser figures, see Nanno Marinatos, “Nicias as Wise Advisor and Tragic Warner in Thucydides,” *Philologus* 124, no. 2 (1980): 305-310.

³² Translation my own, from the Greek text of N.G. Wilson, *Herodoti Historiae* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015).

gods we believe and of humanity we know, that, by a necessity of nature, wherever they have power, they always rule. We neither established this law, nor, as it is made, are we the first to put it to use..." (V.105.2).³³ The Athenians' refusal to recognize their innovation gives the reader a clear sense that the Athenians have not recognized the end point of the road they are traveling down, and reinforces the sense of foreboding as the Sicilian narrative begins almost immediately after the Melian Dialogue.³⁴

Using the claim to continuity to justify a new and risky enterprise distinguishes Xerxes and Alcibiades from their predecessors. In Herodotus, the prior Persian kings did not invoke tradition in their invasions; in Thucydides' account, Pericles—the most stirring orator on the subject of Athenian character—does not claim that the Athenians are unchanged. Xerxes' and Alcibiades' claims to be continuing what has previously been done—and more specifically their claim that imperial aggression is in keeping with their people's character, shows an inadequate way of thinking about and making use of the past, with deep implications for how readers should understand the purpose of both of these texts. For both Thucydides and Herodotus, attempts to learn from one's own past—that is, using oneself as a paradigm to try to achieve future success—can be self-defeating. Actors, whether individual or collective, are especially bad at understanding their own past, because it is difficult to grasp one's own evolution. The

³³ Noting the connection between Xerxes and the Melian Dialogue without comment, W.W. How and J. Wells, *A Commentary on Herodotus*, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1912), ad loc. A key difference is that the Athenians are making a claim about the justice of their actions as something that all humans do, while Xerxes is making a claim that applies only to the Persians. Nonetheless, there is a shared rhetoric of continuity with established practice.

³⁴ On the dramatic juxtaposition between the Melian Dialogue and the Sicilian Disaster, Hugh Lloyd-Jones, *The Justice of Zeus*, 143. Cf. Strauss, *City and Man*, 192-209.

differences between one's own current situation and earlier circumstances tend to get lost in our desire to see a link between prior generations and current reality.

Herodotus and Thucydides draw differing conclusions from this observation; to speak broadly, for Herodotus the study of other nations and their leaders is helpful, hence his emphasis on comparative cultural study. For Thucydides, it is the broad study of present circumstances—relative power, quality of leadership, the psychology of fear and self-interest—that most accurately explains events. But for both Herodotus and Thucydides, drawing lessons exclusively from one's own past is not sufficient for informing good decisions.

Herodotus further illustrates the problem of self-centered historical learning through the central character of Croesus. Croesus attempts to draw wisdom from his own disastrous invasion of Persia, implicitly comparing Cyrus' later campaign against the Masegetae to his own campaign against Cyrus: "my own sufferings have made for harsh learning... know that human affairs are on a wheel, turning so that it does not allow anyone to be prosperous forever. So I now have an opinion about the present matter contrary to the opinions of these others" (Hdt., I.207).³⁵ Cyrus finds Croesus' wisdom drawn from his past compelling and changes his mind.

But, as it happens, upon taking Croesus' advice Cyrus is defeated and killed. Croesus' bad advice has been interpreted to show either that human beings are incapable of historical learning, or that Croesus' advice is deficient because in the presence of a despot no truly good advice can be given.³⁶ Hans-Peter Stahl in particular notes that Croesus seems to have failed to

³⁵ Trans. David Grene (Chicago: University of Chicago Press 1987).

³⁶ Stahl, "Learning Through Suffering? Croesus' Conversations in the *History* of Herodotus." *Yale Classical Studies* 24 (1975): 29. Cf. Christopher Pelling, who sees the scene as "bringing out the limitations of free speech" at a "dynastic court." "Speech and Narrative in the *Histories*," in *The Cambridge Companion to Herodotus*, ed. Carolyn Dewald (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 169, 168.

learn his lesson from his own history, which he takes to illustrate “man’s narrow learning capacity.”³⁷

Instead of taking the lesson to be the hopelessness of learning from history, I propose that we take it to be a narrower lesson about the limitations of past experiences for informing present decision-making. Using an appeal to historical precedent to justify the continuation of a similar policy ignores the change in circumstances that has since occurred. The Athenians of the Sicilian Expedition are not the same city that they were when they defeated the Persians. They are now more similar to the Persians, and as such it is no longer fitting to compare themselves to their ancestors; the activity that defined them in defending Greece from invasion is fundamentally different from the activity of invading others.³⁸ Similarly, Xerxes’ Persians are no longer the same people whom Cyrus led from obscurity and poverty to take over the empire of the Medes (and, clearly, Xerxes is no Cyrus).³⁹ For Xerxes to see his job as one of imitating prior generations of Persians shows that he does not understand how fundamentally his situation is different from that of his forefathers. If we understand the fatalistic or deterministic appeals to one’s own past to be an established trope presaging doom, based on our reading of Herodotus, the Athenian *demos*’ parallel to Xerxes should strike us as indicating a dangerous kind of reasoning. The need to construct a coherent narrative does not justify looking exclusively to one’s own past way of doing things to justify present action. The need for continuity must be balanced by an awareness of the circumstances that distinguish past from present.

³⁷ Quoted in Pelling, “Speech and Narrative,” 171. Cf. Pelling, “Educating Croesus: Talking and Learning in Herodotus’ Lydian *Logos*,” *Classical Antiquity* 25, no. 1 (April 2006): 141-177.

³⁸ The Syracusans have taken the place of the Athenians in this parallel, see Luginbill, *Thucydides on War and National Character*, 178-88. Cf. Connor, *Thucydides*, 174.

³⁹ Plato, *Laws* 694-5.

Nicias' Failure to Reason with Narrative

While facile appeals to the past are unhealthy, some ability to reason through a common narrative seems necessary for a speaker to be effective. Nicias, Alcibiades' opponent in the Sicilian Expedition debate, entirely fails to grasp the importance of offering his audience a compelling narrative of their character in his opposition to the expedition. In the previous chapter, I analyzed Nicias' contribution to the disastrous Sicilian Expedition decision as misguided for its (unintended) contribution to his audience's optimism. His rhetoric of preparation drive his listeners to the belief that, given proper preparation, victory was assured. This leads them to gamble far more on the expedition than they otherwise would have, and exacerbates the severity of the eventual disaster. Essentially, Nicias' effort to redirect the debate towards the material considerations that could minimize the risk of defeat had the opposite of his intended effect and prompted the Athenians to be all the more committed to the Expedition.⁴⁰

Nicias' rhetorical failure is also a failure to reason narratively with his audience. He does not fit his advice to them into a story of who they are. The Athenian self-image gave pride of place to their daring and to their intelligence. Their pluck and their resourcefulness allowed them to defeat the Persians, and their love of a good challenge is what attracts them to the prospect of conquering Sicily. Their invasion of Sicily must be understood as at least partially a function of their self-image. Nicias fails to understand this, and as such he fails to make the most persuasive possible case.

⁴⁰ Cf. Lunbeck and Stone, "The Wise Adviser Trap."

For Nicias, the invasion of Sicily should be rejected if the people understand the material factors and the motivations of the speakers who are advising them. He spends most of his speech detailing the precariousness of their current position and the particular challenges of subduing Sicily, and rounds out his speech by attacking the motivations of his opponent, Alcibiades.⁴¹ None of these points is particularly effective. Nicias admits even as he starts his speech it is unlikely to work:

Nevertheless, I have never before spoken against my judgment for the sake of preferment, nor shall I do so now. I will speak in the way that I understand (γινώσκω) to be best. And against that character of yours (τοὺς τρόπους τοῦς ὑμετέρους) my speech (λόγος) would be weak enough, if I were to advise you to save what you already have and not to risk what is in hand for uncertain prospects. But this much I will teach (διδάξω) you: that you are hasty at the wrong time, and that it is not easy to achieve what you are rushing into (VI.9.2-3).

Nicias' tone about the Athenians' character is denigrating and distancing. It is held at a sort of arm's length, as "that character of yours," not as a common character that he participates in as an Athenian. He comes off as a hectoring speaker who sees it as his job to act as a school instructor rather than a counselor. To this point, his language is weighted with the vocabulary of knowledge and authority. He implies that their character is not something to be reasoned with,

⁴¹ Indulging in personal attacks is an unusual move for a character advocating sober deliberation against an unscrupulous foe. See Cogan, *The Human Thing*, 229. Connor observes, "In Greek literature it is unusual for a wise adviser to indulge in personal attacks. His concerns and arguments are normally restricted to the public level." *Thucydides*, 163. It is worth noting that at Athens even Diodotus responds to Cleon's attacks on his motives by implying that Cleon is either stupid or has ulterior motives in wishing to prevent further debate (III.42.2), but even in this case Cleon is far more focused on personal invective, so Diodotus is at least relatively impersonal. In the case of Nicias and Alcibiades, Alcibiades is the one who emerges as the high-minded consensus builder, while Nicias' speech is characterized by divisive appeals to age against youth and personal invective. Nicias and Alcibiades defy easy categorization as wise adviser and demagogue, respectively.

but against. All he can hope to do is convince them of the accuracy and reasonableness of his assessment of the situation.

For Nicias, the process of collective decision-making is nothing more than the process of gathering correct knowledge about the situation at hand. He fails to provide any deeper narrative for his argumentation. If the Athenians are drawn to the Sicilian Expedition because they see it as the characteristically Athenian thing to do, Nicias should provide them an alternative narrative of Athens with which to reason. He could do so by contesting Alcibiades' version of their history and pointing out the massive and unnecessary disaster that their expedition to Egypt met when they went to a land that they did not understand and had no business invading (I.109-110). He could emphasize the opportunities for their daring closer to home—instead of framing it negatively, he could have framed a more cautious strategy as a means of preparing for the ultimate conquest of Sparta. One can imagine many possible alternatives to Nicias' approach; any that treated the Athenian character as something to be reasoned with and channeled rather than opposed could only have been more successful.⁴²

It has often been noted that Nicias fails to act like an Athenian; his piety and caution seem more Spartan than Athenian.⁴³ His failure to reason with the Athenians about the meaning of their character reflects a basic lack of understanding of the human need to make sense of themselves in the world by aiming for something worthy of their past and their present abilities.⁴⁴

⁴² Nicias mentions the rebellious colonies to the north, (VI.10.5), but he fails to propose any particular action against them. Indeed, the thrust of his speech is that Athens must conserve resources and remain “quiet” (ἡσυχάζόντων) to prevent the Spartans and others from breaking their treaties (VI.10.2-3). Nicias' failure is capture by the fact that Alcibiades is able to frame the opposition between Nicias and himself as a choice between inactivity and “activity” (VI.18.7).

⁴³ Strauss, *The City and Man*, 206-9.

⁴⁴ On Nicias' failure to understand human psychology or human nature, see Tsakmakis, “Leaders, Crowds, and the Power of the Image: Political Communication in Thucydides,” 169.

If Alcibiades' shows the dangers of turning character into destiny, Nicias shows the dangers of ignoring character altogether.

It would be a mistake to read Nicias' failure as evidence that Thucydides is a fatalist, showing us the inevitable futility of a wise adviser, or a tragic warner, opposing a tyrannical ruler who is blinded by passions and swept along to inevitable disaster.⁴⁵ The scenes of decision-making in Thucydides make a difference. In Nicias' case, it is crucial to understanding the scene to note that he actively contributes to the disaster. His mistake is to see character as simply irrational and static, and to take a defeatist approach to it rather than trying to shape it. If he had not been such a fatalist—that is, if he had not acted so much like a tragic warner—he may not have ended up like one. Thucydides shows us not so much that wise advice is futile, as that a speaker who adopts the language of the wise adviser may in fact be contributing to the disaster he seeks to avert.⁴⁶

The Rhetoric of Character: Archidamus and Pericles

From the contrast between Alcibiades and Nicias, then, it seems that certain kinds of appeals to character are dangerous; nonetheless, such appeals can be necessary to galvanize an audience. Alcibiades and Nicias represent the poles of reasoning through character. Within these poles we can place other speakers in order to better evaluate the quality of their advice.

⁴⁵ On the tragic warner and wise adviser tropes, see Henrich Bischoff, *Der Warner bei Herodot*, in *Herodot: Eine Auswahl aus der Neueren Forschung*, ed. Walter Marg (Munich: C.H. Beck, 1962) and Richmond Lattimore, "The Wise Adviser in Herodotus," *Classical Philology* 34, no. 1 (1939): 24-35. On Nicias in this tradition, see Nanno Marinatos, "Nicias as a Wise Advisor and Tragic Warner in Thucydides," 305-310.

⁴⁶ Cf. Lunbeck and Stone, "The Wise Adviser Trap."

In Book I, as the Athenians and the Spartans both deliberate going to war, the two most respected leaders in each city give long speeches in which one makes the case for restraint and the other makes the case for immediate war. They take contrasting approaches to persuading their audiences, particularly with respect to the invocation of collective character. The Spartan king Archidamus speaks at length urging against a rush to war, and offers a definition and defense of the Spartan character in a speech that seems reasonable, but is tellingly ineffective.

Archidamus responds to the Corinthian criticisms of Spartan character by claiming that their characteristic slowness is a strength rather than a weakness. He claims for the Spartan character a uniquely efficacious balance between deliberation and action:

And regarding the slowness and procrastination for which they are especially criticizing us, do not be ashamed. For being quicker may entail taking longer to put an end to it if we start off unprepared, and moreover for a long time we have inhabited a free and reputable city. This [quality] most approximates a sensible moderation (σωφροσύνη ἔμφρων); on account of which we alone do not become arrogant in success, and we yield less than others in the face of adversity. We are not moved by the pleasure of being urged on by the praise of others to take risks against our better judgment, nor, conversely, are we any more persuaded by the irritation of being goaded by insults. We are both warlike and good deliberators on account of our being well-ordered. Warlike because self-respect takes the greatest part of moderation, as good courage does of shame; good deliberators because we are educated with too little learning to despise the laws, and with too harsh a moderation/discipline (σωφρονέστερον) to defy them... (I.84.1-3).

Archidamus rounds out his thoughts on the advantages of Spartan character with a connection to their past:

These practices (μελέτας), which our fathers handed down to us, and which we have benefitted from having for so long, should not be set aside. Nor should we be rushed into making a decision, in the short span of one day, something affecting the lives, possessions, cities, and reputation of many, but we should do so at leisure (καθ' ἡσυχίαν). Because of our strength, we can afford to do so more than others (I.85.1).

Unlike Alcibiades before the Athenians, Archidamus' appeal to his audience's character is "wholly ineffectual."⁴⁷ Archidamus seems to understand the need to reason with his audience about who they are and what they want their story to be, but he is not able to make a persuasive case. Some scholars take this as an indictment of the Spartans as not only irrational but displaying a "scorn of reason."⁴⁸ But this seems to let Archidamus off too easily for his failure. To understand where he falls short it is necessary to look at his opponent, Sthenelaidas.

Sthenelaidas is not presented as an admirable figure, and he is generally contrasted unfavorably with Archidamus. But Sthenelaidas' speech is fairly savvy.⁴⁹ His brevity and simplicity are more characteristically Spartan than Archidamus' sophisticated rhetorical display, and he offers a counter-narrative to Archidamus' claims about Sparta.

I do not understand the many words of the Athenians. They said many things in praise of themselves, but at no point denied that they are doing injustice to our allies and to the Peloponnese. And surely if they were good against the Persians in the past, but now are bad to us, they deserve a double punishment, since they changed from good to bad. We, however, are actually the same now as we were then, and, if we are moderate/disciplined (σωφρονῶμεν) we will not overlook the injustices done to our allies, nor delay coming to their aid, since they are suffering bad things without delay. Others have a great deal of money, ships, and horses; we have good allies. They must not be given up to the Athenians, and this must not be adjudicated with legal proceedings and words, because they were not harmed by words; instead, we must help with speed and with all our strength. Let no one instruct us that it is proper to deliberate while we are suffering injustice—it is more proper for those who are going to do an injustice to spend a long time deliberating. So vote, Lacedaemonians, for a war worthy of Sparta, and do not permit the Athenians to become greater; nor should we betray our allies, but together with the gods let us move against the doers of injustice (I.86).

⁴⁷ Edmund F. Bloedow, "The Speeches of Archidamus and Sthenelaidas at Sparta," *Historia* 30 no. 2 (1981): 131.

⁴⁸ J. Finley, quoted in Bloedow, "The Speeches of Archidamus and Sthenelaidas at Sparta," 135.

⁴⁹ As Stahl (who takes it as a "masterpiece of subtle rhetoric") acknowledges. *Man's Place in History*, 56.

With this strikingly short speech—the shortest in Thucydides’ text—Sthenelaidas offers a surprisingly compelling argument. The Greek is more awkward than Archidamus’ balanced phrasing, but he skillfully contests the language and narrative of Archidamus’ speech. Both speakers urge their audience to behave with characteristic Spartan discipline (or moderation) (σωφροσύνη). Sthenelaidas plays to his audience’s self-conception as a people of few words but a willingness to take action for the sake of justice. The denigration of wordiness in deliberation indirectly casts his opponent as less Spartan.

Conversely, Archidamus equates careful deliberation and a slowness to act with the Spartan character. But he seems to misjudge his audience because he offers them no positive vision of what the Spartan story is.⁵⁰ He emphasizes the difficulty of beating the Athenians without acknowledging that the Spartans take pride in a difficult challenge. He urges careful consideration without offering a clear limiting principle to deliberation. While his observations on the material strength of the Athenians, and the likely difficulty of a war with them are all correct, his failure of persuasion follows from a failure to reason with the Spartans through a compelling narrative. Christopher Pelling has noted that Archidamus poorly tailors his speech to his audience, and explains it as a function of his being “too rational.”⁵¹ This explanation seems to neglect the ways in which his audiences have a mode of reasoning that is different from his, and not simply irrational. At some level, Archidamus understands that he must tailor his message to his audience (hence his emphasis on the practices handed down from their fathers), but his answer to the narrative challenge of “what is the Spartan thing to do” is not compelling.

⁵⁰ As John Finley notes, his is “an essentially negative, limiting, discipline...” *Thucydides*, 149.

⁵¹ Pelling, “Thucydides’ Archidamus and Herodotus’ Artabanus,” 129.

In some ways Archidamus seems more Athenian than Spartan.⁵² He says that “war is not so much a matter of arms as of money” (I.83.2), which cuts against the Spartan ethos of virtuous poverty over material gain. His emphasis on the difficulty of taking on such a fight also suggests that his proposals—that they send an ultimatum (I.82.1) and submit their complaints to arbitration (I.85.2)—may be a disingenuous effort to avoid the conflict rather than allow time to prepare for it, since the material advantages of the Athenians will hold true even with a few more months (or even years) of preparation. His references to how their lack of learning makes them good deliberators, and how moderation equates with being warlike have a sophistic ring to them, and may be too clever by half. His claim that the Spartans are the only people to resist arrogance when they are successful is flattering but not supported by their behavior up to this time—the Spartan general Pausanias, as Thucydides goes on to tell us in detail, demonstrates the easy corruptibility of Spartan leaders when he immediately becomes arrogant and traitorous after his success against Xerxes (I.130-131). Archidamus’ assertion that the Spartan slowness reflects a perfect balance between careful consideration and willingness to make war prefigures Pericles’ similar flattery of the Athenians, when he says that they are unique for their ability to combine “daring and calculation” to the highest degree (II.40.3). Both leaders cast their audience as the perfect balance between competing values. By using such language, Archidamus seems more like Pericles than like other Spartans.

It is possible to imagine a more narratively compelling version of Archidamus speech. Such a speech would likely articulate a clear standard of when it would be appropriate to make war on the Athenians. It perhaps would spend less time flattering his audience that their character

⁵² Contra Jaffe, who sees Archidamus as the “apostle of Spartan rest.” *Thucydides on the Outbreak of War*, 102.

is the best possible character. And it would focus more on the beliefs that motivate the Spartans the most: justice and the gods. Sthenelaidas adroitly focuses on justice in his abbreviated speech, and claims the support of the gods in his conclusions. This is savvy because it is crucial to the Spartan self-image and their morale that they consider themselves to be in the right. We see this later in the war: after the Athenians violate the terms of the Peace of Nicias (VI.105), the Spartans feel that they are now in the right, whereas in the initial stage of the war they had “deservedly suffered” for breaking the peace (VII.18.2). If Archidamus had focused on the injustice and impiety of breaking the treaty without arbitration, and had urged consultation of the oracle, this would have played to the Spartans’ self-image as pious defenders of justice. Archidamus’ failure is a failure to reason with his audience about who they are and what their story is—he offers them a definition of their character but does not situate it in a positive narrative.

Thucydides ends the Spartan Debate with an interesting piece of political maneuvering by Sthenelaidas (I.87). The Spartans normally vote by acclamation (in contrast with the Athenian show of hands), but because there is so much shouting, Sthenelaidas insists that the Spartans vote by dividing themselves physically into two groups, at which point he asks them only if they think the Athenians had broken the treaty and were in the wrong, or not. A strong majority supports the contention that the Athenians are in the wrong and moves to that side of the assembly. There are a number of implications of this scene. Firstly, if the question had been different—if, for example, he had asked “should we go to war without offering arbitration, as the treaty requires,” then the vote may have been different. Sthenelaidas understands that this vote involves a judgment on who the Spartans are and how they think of themselves, so he manipulates the question to emphasize the guilt of their enemies, and thereby their own relative justice. The

reader also gains a strong sense of the communal nature of this decision. The Spartans, much like the Athenians, are making the decision for war as a people. The focus of attention is not the speaker but the voters as they move themselves towards war. The Spartans reject Archidamus' advice and choose war because they are choosing to define the Spartan character—and the Spartan story—as one of decisive action when it matters most.

Archidamus may be the wiser man, but his speech is crucially lacking. He does not take his role to be engaging with his audience in the activity of constructing a compelling Spartan narrative, but is content to make a simple claim that they should follow their established and characteristic way of acting. If Nicias fails to speak to the Athenians in an Athenian manner, Archidamus fails to speak to the Spartans in a Spartan manner—he fails to give properly Spartan reasons for delaying war. He assumes that he can reduce Spartan character to their characteristic slowness, and that his audience will find such a reductive appeal to their character compelling.

In Athens, Pericles presents a counterpoint to Archidamus, in that he is more successful and that he less directly invokes the Athenians' character. As Pericles puts it, the issue for Athens is one of maintaining the status quo. Do they wish to remain free or do they wish to become slaves of the Spartans? (I.141.1). Although he emphasizes their material superiority, he does not reduce war to money. Instead, he echoes Herodotus' Themistocles (Hdt., VII.62.1) in stating “houses and land do not give us men; men acquire these things” (I.143.5). He does not reference Athenian character directly, but implies that it might be a problem. He advises them not to extend their empire or take on other conflicts, and then confesses a certain lack of optimism: “I am more afraid of our personal mistakes (τὰς οικείας ἡμῶν ἀμαρτίας) than I am of the plans of others” (I.144.1). At a moment of decision, Pericles does not flatter his audience that their character makes them ideally suited for this conflict. If anything, he implies that their

character is a problem. But he nonetheless holds out to his audience the possibility of being better than the rash daring that the Corinthians assign them. What defines them is that they are free, but they are also steadfast. The Athenians consider Pericles' advice to be good, and they set themselves on the path towards war (I.145), while committing themselves to waging it with a strategic restraint.

Note that Pericles' appeals to character are subtler than Archidamus'. While it is important to offer the public a compelling story of who they are, Pericles seems to view his role as less about dictating the meaning of the Athenian story and more about showing them the importance of this decision for continuing their collective story as a free city. He does not argue that character is destiny, or that the only reasonable thing to do is what has been done in the past. He offers the Athenians a version of their story which is complicated and contains values that may be in tension, without offering to resolve these tensions for them. Reasoning narratively with an audience need not involve making things simple for them.

We can conclude from the speeches of Archidamus and Pericles that collective character is a question to be deliberated rather than a simple explanation for behavior. The Spartans behave decisively and reject appeals to their character, while the Athenians find implicit criticism of their character compelling (for the time being) and follow a strategy of firm but restrained preparation for war. Neither city is obviously playing out the Corinthian caricature of how they characteristically act. Both are infusing their reasoning about war with a narrative of character, and both are willing to set themselves against the simplest interpretation of who they are and why they act as they do. Thucydides conveys a great deal of respect for both the Spartans and the

Athenians for their decision to go to war; their intelligence is reflected in the complex ways in which both people's navigate the consideration of their own characters.⁵³

The Rhetoric of Innovation: Hermocrates and Diodotus

Building on Pericles' success through complexity, one can better evaluate the appeals to character made by two different but sympathetically presented speakers in Thucydides.

Hermocrates in Sicily and Diodotus in Athens are by no means perfect, but Hermocrates is vindicated by subsequent events (without being implicated, as Nicias is, in bringing about disaster), while Diodotus manages to avoid defeat using a skillful series of arguments about Athenian identity. Both avoid the rhetoric of character as destiny.

Hermocrates' appeal to the Sicilians is to put aside their petty differences and to surprise the Athenians before their expedition can arrive: "That which I think would be most timely you will be least keen to be persuaded to do, on account of your habitual quietude (διὰ τὸ ξύνηθες ἤσυχον), nonetheless I will say it" (VI.34.4). He goes on to propose that the Sicilians unite and launch a combined fleet to surprise the Athenian invasion force before they arrive at Sicily. Hermocrates argues that the Athenians might be so discouraged by early resistance from the Syracusans, whom they consider an easy target, that they might never even finish their voyage past Corcyra (VI.34.6). The psychological impact of encountering an unexpected "daring" resistance would be more effective than the actual power of the Sicilian fleet. (VI.34.8).

⁵³ Contra Luginbill who sees these speeches as showing the equivalence of Archidamus and Pericles in their ability to counter national character, I see Pericles as taking a radically different approach to the consideration of character. *Thucydides on War and National Character*, chap. 11.

Hermocrates' appeal to Sicilian character avoids using the word *tropos*, instead referring to their *ethos* or customary habits, but it is essentially a synonym in this context. He acknowledges their characteristic way of acting, and he asks them to deviate from it. His vision of Syracuse and of the Sicilians is that despite their long history of division and internecine fighting, they could rise to the occasion and unite in the face of a common enemy.⁵⁴ They could choose the path of decisive action and strike the first blow, instead of waiting for the Athenians.

Hermocrates' daring proposed naval strategy has confused scholars, in that it does not seem immediately clear how we are to take it. It is risky and, it has been pointed out, likely impossible to pull off, given the Athenian fleet's head start. It has been argued, therefore, that Hermocrates is being disingenuous—by suggesting an extremely daring strategy, perhaps he is engaging in a “debating manoeuvre” and truly hoping to settle for some basic siege preparations.⁵⁵ Alternatively, it has been suggested, the focus on “daring” is to highlight the Athenian characteristics of Hermocrates' vision of Syracuse.⁵⁶ Monoson and Loriaux take Hermocrates to be a sort of conservative counterpoint to Pericles: Hermocrates “conceptualizes prudent action as participation in that violent struggle with the goal of preserving the social norms that make prudent action possible.”⁵⁷ In the sense that Syracuse is in a defensive rather than imperialist position, this is inherently true of Hermocrates' politics, but it neglects the key

⁵⁴ Hermocrates appears earlier in the book as a broker of peace between the cities of Sicily in the face of possible Athenian aggression (IV.59-64).

⁵⁵ H.D. Westlake, *Essays on the Greek Historians and Greek History*, (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1969), 182.

⁵⁶ Mara, *Civic Conversations*, 119: “The success of Hermocrates' proposals, both narrowly and broadly understood, depends on his ability to foster a new, more Athenian, sense of Syracuse political identity. In calling for such radical changes in self-conception, Hermocrates implicitly presents himself as a leader whose achievements do not simply parallel Pericles', but go beyond them.”

⁵⁷ Monoson and Loriaux, “The Illusion of Power and the Disruption of Social Norms,” 291.

point that I wish to highlight here. Hermocrates is revising the Syracusan story. He is urging a break with their characteristic behavior so they can improve on their track record. The past serves not so much as a parallel to the present as a contrast with what they can achieve in the future. By contrast with Alcibiades' deterministic appeals to past ways of acting, Hermocrates avoids making definitive pronouncements about the Syracusan character or their past—he rather leaves it to his audience to recognize the difference between what he proposes and what they have done in the past. He suggests change from past patterns of behavior without engaging in denigration of the Syracusan character, as Nicias does of the Athenian character, and he offers a positive agenda rather than a negative prescription.

Diodotus' Complex and Contested Vision of Athens

Besides the Sicilian Debate, a signature moment of deliberation in post-Periclean Athens is the Mytilene Debate (III.36-49). In that debate Diodotus makes far subtler appeals to the Athenians than his opponent, Cleon. For this reason he is often critiqued as a sophistic speaker (and it is certainly possible, as we noted in chapter one, that his audience is moved by the implicit flattery of his speech).⁵⁸ But the complexity of Diodotus' speech may reveal a deep understanding of the nature of narrative reasoning on his part.

To briefly recap: Cleon urges the Athenians to recognize who they truly are—an empire and a tyranny over other cities—and to behave as such. Anything but executing the Mytileneans, who are all guilty and deserve death, is the result of allowing sophistic orators to mislead them into acting against the dictates both of justice and of their own self-interest (III.38-9). Diodotus'

⁵⁸ Macleod, "Reason and Necessity," 74-77. Cf. Ober, "Thucydides Theoretikos/Thucydides Histor," 296.

contention, by contrast, is that deliberation is healthy (III.42) and that self-interest can be served through mercy (III.47).

For Cleon, the story of the Athenians is simple. They are an overindulgent ruler who allow themselves to be taken advantage of by deceptive speakers. For Diodotus, it is more complicated. Athens may be a tyrant over other cities, but need not behave as other tyrants would. The Athenian people are not stupid to reconsider their initial decision, but they are often stupid in how they honor and ridicule those who seek to advise them. They are capable of pursuing self-interest through appealing to the hopes as well as the fears of their subjects. Diodotus does not offer a simple narrative for the Athenians. He invites them to consider themselves as complicated actors.

Diodotus recognizes that there is a major question about the Athenian character and story at stake in this decision, and he offers advice that resists an easy or simple answer to that question. In the past, the Athenians have conducted themselves imperfectly, but they now have a chance to right the ship. This can happen only if they listen to Diodotus and develop a more robust understanding of the psychology of other cities and a better appreciation of the value of the good advice that contributes to this understanding. Diodotus' story of the Athenian character is open to change and reinterpretation, and even a plurality of simultaneous narratives. While demagogic figures like Cleon and Alcibiades offer a simple and authoritative account of the Athenian character, more admirable speakers offer complexity and nuance to suggest ways in which their audience can be better than their past selves.

Drawing Parallels with the Past: Harmodius and Aristogeiton

In the end, the Sicilian Expedition is doomed by the Athenian people's embrace of an overly simple parallel between past and present. The people's suspicion of Alcibiades, which ultimately leads them to recall him from the expedition and leave it in the hands of the disastrously indecisive Nicias, is directly based on their attempts to understand the present in light of the past. They recollect the rule of their tyrants, and of the difficulty with which they were overthrown, and this makes them suspicious of tyrannical conspiracies:

The people knew by hearsay how the tyranny of Peisistratus and his sons became harsh towards the end, and furthermore that it was not overthrown by themselves and Harmodius but by the Spartans; so they were always fearful and were regarding everything with suspicion (VI.53.3).

Thucydides is unusually interested in the story of the tyrants and the legendary tyrannicides, Harmodius and Aristogeiton. It is the only episode of Athenian history that he explores on two separate occasions; first he brings it up during his statement of method in book I, and then he explores it in greater detail to explain the Athenian people's suspicious frame of mind in book VI. The popular narrative seems to have held that Harmodius and Aristogeiton were motivated by a love of liberty and that they successfully killed an oppressive tyrant, therein planting the seeds for the future rule of the *demos*. Thucydides stresses the inaccuracy of the popular account: "neither others nor the Athenians themselves speak with accuracy of their tyrants or of this event" (VI.54.1). His account corrects the popular version by noting that it confuses who was tyrant at the time of the assassination (noted also at I.20.2), and that it was in fact the result of erotic jealousy (an "erotic happenstance" ἐρωτικὴν ξυντυχίαν). He further corrects the popular

memory by noting that before the assassination of Hipparchus, the tyrants were not particularly oppressive, and in fact “cultivated wisdom and virtue to the greatest extent” (VI.54.5-6).⁵⁹

Thucydides’ interest in this story is not simply a historian’s obsession with getting the details right. This is a bit of history that the Athenians draw direct parallels to in their understanding of their current politics. As Connor has pointed out (but few others have noted), the Athenians are correct in their most salient memory, which is that the tyrants of old became brutal and oppressive, and that the Spartans liberated them.⁶⁰ The Athenians’ fixation on stopping a possible tyrannical coup is motivated primarily by an accurate understanding of how bad the tyranny of Hippias became.

While their information is thus in some ways accurate, how they respond to it is unhealthy:

The people of Athens had taken all this to heart (ένθυμούμενος) and were mindful (μυνησκόμενος) of what they knew (ήπίστατο) of these events from hearsay (άκοή). So

⁵⁹ The strength of Thucydides’ positive language about the tyrants is often lost in translations. Mynott translates a key phrase as “compared to other tyrants they set the highest standards of behaviour and good sense,” while in Thucydides there is no reference to a relative standard of their virtue. Hunter R. Rawlings III notes the exceptional nature of the praise: “They are the only persons in his entire work, other than Brasidas, to be given the twin characteristics of high moral and intellectual qualities.” *The Structure of Thucydides’ History*, 106. Cf. Michael Palmer, who perhaps overstates the case when he identifies the tyrants as Thucydides’ idea of a “good regime.” “Alcibiades and the Question of Tyranny in Thucydides,” *Canadian Journal of Political Science* 15, no. 1 (1982): 122. Martin Dreher notes that while the Peisistratids are praised, it is largely framed in relation to other tyrants and the excessive behavior that we would expect of them, so we should not extrapolate from this praise a broader support of tyranny as a regime. “*Turannis* in the Work of Thucydides,” in *Thucydides and Political Order*, ed. Christian R. Thauer and Christian Wendt (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), 95-6.

⁶⁰ Connor thus sees “the dangers inherent in historical knowledge” since it is the *demos*’ correct knowledge of the horrors of the tyranny of Hippias which leads them to be so paranoid. *Thucydides*, 177n47. Contra Mabel Lang, who articulates the scholarly consensus: “Thucydides’ corrections go beyond those of Herodotus. They undermine every point of the popular ‘knowledge’, on which the fear and suspicion of 415 B.C. was based, and so deny the validity both of the analogy and of the fearful suspicions.” “The Murder of Hipparchus,” *Historia: Zeitschrift für Alte Geschichte* 3, no. 4 (1955): 398.

they were at this time harsh (χαλεπός) and suspicious of those who had been accused concerning the Mysteries, and they thought everything had been done to further an oligarchic or tyrannical conspiracy. And because they were enraged about this matter, many well-regarded men were already in prison and there seemed no end to it; on the contrary, every day the people were growing more savage and were arresting even more men... (VI.60.1).

Notably, the language of Thucydides' description emphasizes their knowledge: it is not the word for belief, which would be some form of *doxa*, but a verbal form of *epistemē*, knowledge, that he uses to describe their understanding of the past.⁶¹ Their "mindful" appreciation of the past is a form of the word for memory, indicating that they are remembering rather than fancifully reconstructing key events. Perhaps most important is their reaction of "taking it to heart," which could also be translated either as "to ponder deeply" or "to be angry about." This choice of words indicates that the Athenians are fixated on the (true) aspects of their history that most rile them up. They miss certain key facts, certainly, such as whether Hippias or Hipparchus was tyrant at the time of the assassination. But the deeper problem is that they are drawing exact parallels between their past and present circumstances, which requires misleading selectivity and results in overwrought worries about the meaning of present events.⁶²

The point of Thucydides' focus on this digression, then, is not to show that the Athenians repeat the same mistakes of their past out of ignorance.⁶³ Even if they had an accurate

⁶¹ Echoing the earlier introduction of the digression, when Thucydides states: "the people knew (ἐπιστάμενος) from hearsay (ἄκοή) how harsh (χαλεπήν) the tyranny of Peisistratus and his sons was when it ended..." (VI.53.3).

⁶² Contra Stahl, who reads the episode as demonstrating the power of ignorance to drive irrational behavior: "Thucydides shows historical *misconception as a direct cause* of action which has jumped the rails of rational control." *Man's Place in History*, 8. This misses the fact that it is knowledge and not ignorance that lies at the heart of their paranoia.

⁶³ Farrar sees the importance of the episode as illustrating the dangers of "failing to understand" the "effects of polarization within the political community," which leads them to "re-enact" the same exacerbating actions. *The Origins of Democratic Thinking*, 146-147.

understanding that Hippias was the tyrant rather than Hipparchus, it would not change their justified fear of the tyrants' oppressiveness. Nor is the point to reveal a consistent truth about the Athenian character or erotic inclinations that links them to the tyrannicides.⁶⁴ Attempts by scholars to draw a strong connection between the story of the tyrannicides and the actions of the Athenians towards Alcibiades are guilty of the same kind of inappropriate search for parallels as the Athenians are. The point is that this episode does *not* reveal an enduring truth, but that the Athenians assume that it does.⁶⁵ Considering the present in light of the past is tempting but dangerous. It may be safer to assume difference than similarity; at the very least one should interrogate with the utmost care any supposed parallel to past events. Thucydides is not criticizing the Athenian *demos* for their inaccurate knowledge, but is instead showing how tricky

⁶⁴ For example, Steven Forde argues that Thucydides "seems to agree with the ordinary Athenians that the story of Harmodius and Aristogeiton captures the essence of the Athenian democracy and character...Thucydides' view, epitomized in the Harmodius and Aristogeiton story, is that excessive suspicion and jealousy toward leaders was Athens' most characteristic attitude, one derived from the core traits of the Athenian character." "Thucydides on the Causes of Athenian Imperialism," 443. Cf. Thomas F. Scanlon, "Thucydides and Tyranny," *Classical Antiquity* 6, no. 2 (1987): 286-301; Elizabeth Meyer, "Thucydides on Harmodius and Aristogeiton, Tyranny, and History," *The Classical Quarterly* 58, no. 1 (2008): 13-34. Victoria Wohl claims the episode "rediscovers" the shared "perversity" of the Athenian *demos* and Alcibiades in their erotic inclinations, *Love Among the Ruins*, 156.

⁶⁵ This assumption leads them to behave in ways that echo the behavior of tyrants, such that there is an ironic resonance between the Athenians' and the tyrants' "harsh" behavior, their fear and anger, and the harm that they ultimately inflict on the city. See Tim Rood, *Thucydides*, 180-1. Connor, "Tyrannis Polis," in *Ancient and Modern: Essays in Honor of Gerald F. Else*, ed. John H. D'Arms and John W. Eadie (Ann Arbor, University of Michigan, 1977), 108-9. This does not so much reveal the inherently tyrannical character of the Athenians as it shows the counter-productive and self-fulfilling consequences of assuming parallels between present and past. Another way of putting this is that if the Athenians had not looked back to their history of tyrants, they would not have acted so tyrannically themselves.

it is to translate knowledge of the past into present policy—and it is a challenge that is in no way restricted to the Athenians or their democracy.⁶⁶

The irony of Alcibiades' trajectory is that the facile connection between past and present that underlies his rhetoric also underlies his downfall. He is eager to draw a direct (and hardly impartial) connection between their present actions and their past. The Athenians' willingness to make the same kind of connections lead them to a paranoia that Alcibiades may be plotting a reinstatement of the tyranny with himself as tyrant (VI.61.1). The Athenians' paranoia can be understood as an extension of an overly simple self-understanding: the Athenian *demos* and its hard-won freedom are always under threat from tyrannical figures, and it is only with vigilance and the willingness to commit violence that liberty can be defended. The Athenians buy into a narrative of themselves that is overly simple and consistent from the past to the present, and this warps their ability to assess present threats and address them constructively.⁶⁷

If even accurate knowledge is dangerous, what is the usefulness of knowing about the past? It is often taken for granted that Thucydides sees the study of history as politically beneficial, since his own authorial statement professes a faith that human nature will cause similar kinds of events to recur (I.21.4). At the very least, Thucydides is committed to correcting

⁶⁶ Ober sees in Thucydides a preference for the historians' knowledge over and against "democratic knowledge," which tends to be less objective, factual, or accurate, "Civic Ideology and Counterhegemonic Discourse: Thucydides on the Sicilian Debate," 103.

⁶⁷ Monoson makes a related point about this episode when she argues that it encourages a neglect of the political issues at hand. "In Thucydides' view, the myth nourishes a foolish forgetting of class hatred and its ability to provoke violence, whereas knowledge of the actual events of 514 nurtures attention to precisely this key dynamic." *Plato's Democratic Entanglements*, 45. I disagree with respect to the focus of his concern. I do not think it likely that Thucydides was concerned that the Athenian people were forgetful of class conflict—if anything they seem to have been overly sensitive to it. What bothers Thucydides is the loss of a sense of difference between the present and the past, not the loss of the understanding of class.

erroneous accounts of past events and erroneous modes of understanding current events. But it is possible that his goal is not to show that historical knowledge is helpful in political decisions, so much as the ways in which it can be counterproductive to dwell on the past. In understanding their own history, as we saw above, the Athenians tend to misattribute the causes of events to ideological or political factors, which contributes to poor decision-making. It is possible that if the Athenians understood the true causes of events they would make better decisions; but what is clear is that the tenor of public discourse was heated and policy became misguided because of an insistence on drawing direct parallels between past and present. If the Athenians had a better understanding of the difference between their past and present and were less concerned with history repeating itself, they would not have made such egregious errors.

The usefulness of historical knowledge may be in moderating the temptation to catastrophize by drawing direct parallels to the darkest episodes of the past. The Athenians' problem is not only that their knowledge is incomplete, but that they are too quick to draw parallels and assume continuity. This mistake can inform our understanding of what Thucydides took to be the enduring value of his work. It may be useful to us precisely because of the distance that we have from the time in which he wrote it. He did not write it with the declaration that it would be useful for the Athenians or the Spartans to look to their own past in order to understand the present. Rather, he declares that it is a "possession for all time" for those who desire to "contemplate clearly" (τὸ σαφῆς σκοπεῖν) both what has happened and what has not yet come to pass, since "the human" (τὸ ἀνθρώπινον) endures (I.22). It may be that it is precisely the readers with great distance from the events that Thucydides describes who can benefit most by contemplation unencumbered by the local distractions and political agenda of his time. The

Athenian mistake of drawing unjustified parallels between past and present does not cast doubt on the benefits that Thucydides offers his own readers.

Passivity vs. Innovation: Themistocles in Herodotus and Thucydides

I will conclude the investigation of character in Thucydides with a brief investigation of the figure who seems to have shaped the Athenian character more than anyone else. In keeping with the interpretation offered above, Thucydides sees the best leaders to be those who innovate new directions for the collective story and are not bounded by precedent. He reserves his highest praise for Themistocles, whom he describes as innovative rather than knowledgeable, and who transformed Athens into a naval empire.

Themistocles models a leadership of ingenuity that is praised by both Herodotus and Thucydides. Herodotus demonstrates his ingenuity in how he interprets an unequivocally negative oracle as a reference to their large fleet, which he had recently advised them to build with the windfall proceeds of their silver mines (Hdt., VII.144). Thucydides' treatment of Themistocles is even more positive than Herodotus', and it focuses similarly on his innovative thinking and decisive actions, which seem to be a key facets of good leadership for Thucydides. While he praises other figures in relative or qualified terms, The unambiguously celebrates Themistocles:

It was his native wit, without the need for additional study beforehand or at the time, that made him outstanding at judging an immediate situation with the minimum of deliberation, and supremely good at envisaging future events very fully. Moreover, he had the ability to give a full exposition of anything he was directly engaged in, and where something was outside his personal experience he still managed to make perfectly adequate judgments; and he could always see in advance the better and worse options in a

still uncertain future. In short, through his natural powers and his speed of reaction he was without equal at improvising the right course of action (I.138.3).⁶⁸

Themistocles is praised principally for being discerning or perspicacious. Although he is not an expert, he is able to make good judgments on topics based on the information at hand, and he has the foresight to perceive the potential costs and benefits of various actions. Scholars who are critical of the Athenians and of Pericles' idealization of Athens have linked Pericles back to Themistocles as a progenitor of his imperial vision of Athens.⁶⁹ But his role in Athens and the nature of Thucydides' praise of him should give us pause before grouping them together as similar leaders.⁷⁰ I would suggest that highlighting their differences might give us a better sense of why Themistocles is praised to a greater degree than Pericles.

Themistocles represents a more democratic and Athenian kind of leadership, in that he operates within a democratic context and exhibits characteristic Athenian virtues. He does not rule Athens in the manner of an autocrat, but must constantly use persuasion (and deception) to achieve his desired policies.⁷¹ He functions as an adviser participating in a fluid political situation. He also is praised for his native intelligence, which facilitates his talent for anticipating the importance of key decisions. He is flexible and able to adapt to a variety of circumstances.

⁶⁸ Mynott translation.

⁶⁹ Burns writes of Pericles as "attempting to complete the project begun by Themistocles." "The Problematic Character of Periclean Athens," 16. Cf. Taylor, *Thucydides, Pericles, and the Idea of Athens in the Peloponnesian War*, 33; Foster, *Thucydides, Pericles, and Periclean Imperialism*, 131.

⁷⁰ As, for example, Balot does, taking them both as model democratic leaders. *Courage in the Democratic Polis*, 45. Cf. Wolfgang Blösel, "Thucydides on Themistocles: A Herodotean Narrator?" in *Herodotus and Thucydides*, ed. Edith Foster and Donald Lateiner (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 233.

⁷¹ In Thucydides' account, Themistocles persuades or gives advice I.14.3, I.90.3, I.92.3, while his Spartan contemporary Pausanias has a "domineering" manner (I.95.1, Mynott translation).

His most important contribution to Athens is the policy of investing in the fleet and also in staking their future on it. It is risky and could easily lead to disaster, but it is intelligent and innovative. If the Athenians are characteristically daring innovators, it is a characteristically Athenian policy (in contrast with the staid strategy of restraint imposed by Pericles).

Themistocles' status as an agent of change seems key to grasping Thucydides' special praise of him. Themistocles transforms Athens at a fundamental level from a city defined by its land holdings to a city defined by its navy. Pericles does not transform Athens meaningfully. His strategy of hiding behind the Long Walls is a temporary expediency in line with the changes already achieved by prior generations. While Martha Taylor (among others) sees Pericles' as engaging in a process of "radical" redefinition of the city as an entity "entirely divorced" from the traditional ties of history, religion, and physical space, it bears noting that Thucydides does not portray Pericles as changing the physical city (even though we know from the visible evidence that his building program did in fact transform its appearance). Pericles is portrayed as defining his thinking based on Athens' existing resources, none of which are his innovation. In a sense, Pericles is a highly passive thinker—his strategy is dictated by material considerations that exist at the time that hostilities happen to break out (as a result of a sequence of events at Corcyra and Epidamnus that are not his doing). Themistocles, on the other hand, changes in response to changing events, and looks for ways to upset the status quo.

Themistocles' ability to give advice that changes the course of the Athenian story may explain the unusual amount of praise that Thucydides heaps on him. While we do not see him the context of a debate in Thucydides' account, we can gather that his forward-looking and innovative advice models a good kind of democratic leadership that is unbounded by established practices or devotion to continuity between past and present. Themistocles creatively innovates a

new direction for Athens and therein a new character for the city. He avoids the fallacy that character is destiny.

Conclusion

In this chapter I have focused on collective deliberation as a process of self-definition for the decision-makers. The character of the decision-making people is not simply a disposition that determines which speakers or arguments they find persuasive. Their character is explicitly the subject under discussion and revision. Major decisions require the people to choose what kind of character they want to have. By considering how they normally do things or how they have done things in the past, we see the Athenians, Spartans, and Syracusans deciding whether one chapter of their collective story is over and whether they are willing to change the course of their narrative. Often they fail to change, and look only established precedent for guidance of their present and future actions, falling prey to the fallacy that character is destiny. Sometimes they succumb to the speaker who offers a simple and authoritative account of their character. But at their best moments, they are receptive to the speakers who offer complicated and multifaceted accounts of their character or suggest ways in which they can change from their historical behaviors.

The Athenian decision to invade Sicily looms large over the entire account of the war as perhaps the paradigmatic example of misguided decision-making. It can be easy to read this scene as an example of blind passions driving the Athenians to their ruin. But if we instead see that they are reasoning about their collective story and responding to Alcibiades' rhetoric of collective character, we can see that it is not madness but an understandable desire for a coherent collective story that motivates them. Conversely, Nicias' failures are not the failure of reason

itself in the face of an irrational mob, but the failure of an adviser who does not understand how to speak to his audience's desire for a policy that will be true to the Athenian character, and who is therefore defeated by his own rhetoric.⁷² Nicias is not as wise an adviser as he casts himself to be. If Alcibiades had been opposed by a speaker with the vision and eloquence to speak to the Athenian story, wisdom may have won out.

One implication of the above exploration is that we can extract a less pessimistic account of popular politics than is generally ascribed to the Greek theorists. For Aristotle, the virtue of the citizens is a prerequisite for healthy deliberation and healthy politics more broadly. Public deliberation is a venue for the expression of character—it can be only as good as the character of the people who participate in it. For Thucydides, the process of deliberation can be transformative. A speaker need not simply engage the faculties of the audience as they are, but can inspire them to become the kind of people who would make the better choice. The people do not simply act according to their pre-established character, but define the story of their collective character through their choices, open to the possibility that their next chapter might be better than their last.

Two modern figures stand out as having shared Thucydides' insights into the possibilities of democratic change. John Stuart Mill built his vision of politics around the idea that individuals could achieve personal happiness and social progress through their participation as free citizens in the deliberation of the common good—a vision that he built on an idealized understanding of Athens.⁷³ Abraham Lincoln invoked the possibilities of “the better angels of our nature” in the

⁷² Contra Stahl, “Herodotus and Thucydides on Blind Decisions Preceding Military Action,” 132.

⁷³ See Nadia Urbinati, *Mill on Democracy: From the Athenian Polis to Representative Government* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2002).

face of an unfolding disaster, and recognized a “new birth of freedom” rather than a return to what came before.⁷⁴ A thread linking Thucydides to Mill and Lincoln is the insight that the strength of democratic politics lies in its capacity to set a new course.

⁷⁴ From the “First Inaugural Address” and “The Gettysburg Address,” in *Political Writings and Speeches*, ed. Terrence Ball (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2013).

Chapter 4 The Fourth Fallacy: Partisanship over Patriotism

Introduction

Previous chapters have dwelled on fallacies that the Athenians are entrapped by: reducing democratic rule to trust; believing that reason conquers all, and looking to established character as destiny. In this chapter, I will look to a fallacy that they are nearly entrapped by, but escape through the virtues of ordinary citizens. This is the fallacy that, in the context of public decision-making, partisanship should take precedence over patriotism.

In the final book of Thucydides' account of the war, the reader is confronted with a surprising and enigmatic lack of closure. It is not controversial to note that this book feels incomplete because of the rougher quality of the prose, the disjointed structure of the narrative, and the almost complete lack of speeches.¹ Cornford considered Book VIII to be a dramatic failure, detracting from the rich pathos of the disaster at Sicily.² Many scholars have argued that the lack of speeches is not simply evidence of incompleteness, but proof of a thematic shift towards individual actors.³ In particular, the narrative follows Alcibiades and his machinations in a way that we have not followed other individuals, at least since Pericles. What is less often noted is that the shift in narrative style and the lack of speeches highlights the state of mind of the Athenian people more than in any previous part of the narrative.⁴ First we witness their

¹ Tim Rood, *Thucydides: Narrative and Explanation*, 283.

² F.M. Cornford, *Thucydides Mythistoricus*, 244.

³ For Hornblower, this is evidence that Thucydides changed his mind and developed an increased sense of the importance of individuals while writing his account. *Thucydides*, 145-50. Cf. Cogan, *The Human Thing*, 165; Connor, *Thucydides*, 215.

⁴ As Goodhart notes, "we get nearer to [the people of Athens]... than we ever have before." Cited in Rood, *Thucydides: Narrative and Explanation*, 252.

consternation and their refusal to accept the reality of the Sicilian disaster, then we see them immediately filled with resolve, then terrorized and cowed into submission by an oligarchic regime, and finally we see them throw off the oligarchs and install the mysterious but highly praised regime of the Five Thousand. At every stage of the narrative, Thucydides comments on the emotions and the state of mind of the Athenians. This chapter contends that the shift in narrative technique is intended to highlight the collective psychology of the Athenians, and thereby the aspects of good politics that do not depend on individual leadership.

Just as in the previous chapter I identified the dangers of reducing collective decisions to prescriptive claims about collective character, in this chapter I identify a similar danger in serving partisan aims through the language of regime. When citizens are concerned with and discuss their regime (*politeia*), their commitment to the *polis* tends to suffer. Conversely, when they can set aside such language we see relatively patriotic and restrained behavior. Abstract constitutional language lends itself easily to partisan sloganeering and stands in the way of compromise and change in response to crises. The Athenians are finally able to “practice good politics” during a time of crisis because they set aside strong claims about their regime and the principles from which their government derives its legitimacy, and this helps them refrain from the worst kind of partisanship and violent factionalism that characterizes *stasis* in other cities. The final picture we have of Athens is the moment of highest direct praise that Thucydides offers

John Zumbrunnen takes the shift of Book VIII to be important, but focuses on the Athenian people as a silent and inactive presence, *Silence and Democracy*, 28-31. I look to the moments of public deliberation as evidence that the Athenians are in fact quite noisy when need be. Thucydides does not name most of the speakers but he clearly conveys the importance of the collective participation in deliberation, and the link between their thoughts, their words, and their actions.

them, not because of their imperial accomplishments, but because of their capacity to change and live together under a regime that sets aside their established democratic slogans.

While this chapter is motivated primarily by an investigation of key passages in Book Eight, it will look to earlier moments in the text to provide context. I begin with a description of the story of Book Eight and pose the question of what accounts for the remarkable resiliency of the Athenians, both at home and abroad. To formulate an answer to this question, I first return to Pericles' brief description of the democratic constitution in the funeral oration to highlight the constitutional ambiguity of his rhetoric. I then shift to an analysis of the demagogue Athenagoras' speech in Syracuse—the only defense of the democratic constitution (*politeia*) in Thucydides—and highlight the surprising clarity of the analysis. I will argue that the abstract discussion of the nature of the *politeia* is intended to appear to the reader as a destructive presence in the context of public decision-making, as it distracts from the problems at hand and encourages division.

I then look to the democracy abroad in the case of the rebellious fleet at Samos and their relation to Alcibiades, and argue for a resonance carried over from Herodotus, whose treatment of Samos and of Darius provides a sinister context for these scenes of deliberation and for Alcibiades' self-presentation as a democratic leader. Alcibiades emerges from this analysis not so much a savior as a symptom of the democratic distortions that Samos is synonymous with in the Athenian imagination, and an example of an elite way of talking about democracy with uncompromising intolerance. The analysis of events at Athens and at Samos shows Thucydides' understanding of the need for a moderate core of citizenry, and also highlights the democratic distortions caused by the deployment of so many of the citizens of the *demos*. The sailors at Samos do not constitute a healthy polity on their own, nor does Athens thrive without them. It is

only absent a proper cross-section of citizens that leaders of Alcibiades' type are needed to keep civil war at bay. Nonetheless, the sailors articulate a minimal requirement of government as deliberating for public goods, which helps us to understand Athenian behavior at home. I conclude by returning to Thucydides' praise of the regime of the Five Thousand and offering an interpretation of Thucydides' striking praise as focused on the citizens' willingness to change and accommodate each other under a new kind of regime that set aside their well-worn partisan slogans.

Rhetoric of the Regime

To understand the dangers of regime-focused rhetoric for public deliberation, it will be helpful to look to the democratic debate in Syracuse as the Athenians invasion approaches. The speech of Athenagoras at Syracuse is the clearest statement of democratic theory in Thucydides. It is also clearly flagged as a moment of bad decision-making: a speaker who is proved wrong on every topic of consequence volunteers to expound a defense of democracy that has nothing to do with the issue at hand, and seems to have little direct effect on the behavior or decision-making of the audience to whom it is addressed. Read as part of the usual view that Thucydides is "hostile" to democracy, it is easy to see why this speech has not received extensive treatment by scholars looking to learn something about the historical theory and practice of democracy in the 5th century.⁵ I propose that the speech is useful for understanding Thucydides' concern with a pattern he observed in various Greek cities of his time, but particularly in Athens: namely the tendency—exploited by unscrupulous speakers such as Alcibiades—to shift the language of

⁵ See A.G. Woodhead, *Thucydides on the Nature of Power* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1970), 31-2.

public deliberation towards sloganeering about the regime. This rhetorical shift contributes to deliberative dysfunction.

This chapter starts from the uncontroversial claim that the citizens in the ancient polis were strongly interested in discussing, defending, and thinking about their regime.⁶ However, this very interest was likely exploited by unscrupulous orators—perhaps especially those trained by the newly emerging sophists—and led Thucydides to see in democratic deliberation an unhealthy susceptibility to language concerning the justification for their rule. Over the course of the war, as cities slide into factional violence, abstract claims about constitutions not only seem to reflect this slide, but contribute to it.⁷

The shift in the language of politics towards partisan sloganeering is not simply a threat to productive conversation—it threatens to unleash violence. As Thucydides shows in his description of *stasis* at Corcyra, a shift in the language of politics marks a deterioration of the community (III.82.4). Thucydides shows a particular interest in understanding the development of conflict as a development of language: “People claimed the right to change the received value of words in relation to action” (III.82.4), and they do so in service of a hyper-politicized ideology that places loyalty to political party over commitment even to the family: “indeed family became

⁶ “Just as democracy permeated and affected every aspect of life in the polis, it must have been a primary concern of thought and discussion in public and private, in theory and practice.” Kurt Raaflaub, “Thucydides on Democracy and Oligarchy,” in *Brill’s Companion to Thucydides*, ed. Antonis Tsakmakis and Antonios Rengakos (Leiden: Brill, 2006), 518. Cf. Raaflaub, “Perceptions of Democracy in Fifth-Century Athens,” in *Aspects of Athenian Democracy*, ed. W. R. Connor (Copenhagen: Museum Tusulanum Press, 1990), 34.

⁷ Roger Brock has pointed out that ideological slogans in political rhetoric not only increases between the works of Herodotus and Thucydides—probably composed a couple of decades apart—but that within Thucydides’ account an increase in democratic and oligarchic sloganeering is explicitly linked to the slide into factional strife (*stasis*). Roger Brock, “The Emergence of Democratic Ideology,” *Historia* 40, no. 2 (1991): 160-169.

more alien than party...” (III.82.6).⁸ The historical implication of this reading of Thucydides, then, is that the 5th-century cities saw a precipitous rise in thinking and speaking in constitutional terms, which inhibited productive cooperation and, in moments of crisis, inflamed factional strife. Thucydides leads the reader to connect the partisan violence of his time with the language of politics that partisans—whether oligarchs or democrats—seem to have invariably appealed to.⁹ Thucydides evinces a concern with both a democratic tendency to infuse particular policy decisions with unhelpfully general and deterministic claims about the nature of the *demos*, the regime (*politeia*) and the city (*polis*), and with elite public figures ability to manipulate such language to serve their own ends.

Athenian Resilience

After the Athenian defeat in Sicily, one might expect that the war would wrap up quickly, or that the Athenians would suffer from panic-induced paralysis in the face of the magnitude of their defeat. Book Eight opens with two long sentences stressing the Athenians’ consternation and

⁸ See Michael Palmer, “Stasis in the War Narrative,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Thucydides*, ed. Ryan Balot, Sara Forsdyke, and Edith Foster (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017).

⁹ Matthew Simonton argues that the various instantiations of violence and stasis in the ancient polis can be explained to some extent by the different claims to legitimacy that democracy and oligarchy appealed to. “Stability and Violence in Classical Greek Democracies and Oligarchies,” *Classical Antiquity* 36, no.1 (2017): 52-103. The preoccupation with democratic theoretical concerns may also shed some light on the Athenians’ failures in Book 4, when their attempt to take Megara and their Boeotian campaign both fail. Their optimism that local democratic factions will act as a fifth column and facilitate an Athenian takeover of their cities is clearly misplaced. Edith Foster frames this as an “inability to attract other strong parties to her much-vaunted democratic constitution,” but I think the Athenian assumption that democratic identity should be stronger than any city’s desire for independence is an unreasonable expectation, perhaps born of an inflated and overly abstract understanding of the importance of democracy. Edith Foster, “Athens’ Political Failures in the Central Chapters of Book 4 of Thucydides,” *Ktèma* 44 (2019): 169.

their fear that their enemies would sail right into the undefended Piraeus (VIII.1-2). But then, suddenly, Thucydides shifts register:

Nevertheless,¹⁰ however, it seemed necessary not to give in but to make preparations with whatever means they had to procure money and timber from wherever they could for a navy, and to secure their allies, especially Euboea; and to moderate the city's affairs to be more economical, and to elect a council of old men (*probouloi*) to rule, as needed, with respect to present affairs. In their current state of great fearfulness, as is typical for the *demos*, they were willing to be well-ordered in all things. And just as they resolved to do, so they did. And the summer ended (VIII.3).

As Hornblower notes, the Athenians' "resiliency is astonishing after the finality of the closure of the expedition..."¹¹ The reader cannot help but feel admiration for the Athenian people.

Thucydides goes on to emphasize that all of Greece—both their enemies and their erstwhile subjects—believe that the Athenians are finished (VIII.2.1-2). All of them are soon proved wrong. The effect on the reader is to feel that the Athenians are defying any rational expectation of what a city could endure and continue to fight. Andrew Wolpert takes the Athenians' establishment of an advisory council of elders as indicative of a problem: "The Athenians seem to have lost confidence in their ability to handle the emergency through established democratic procedures and institutions."¹² Wolpert links this lack of confidence to a broader hesitancy that hampers their military daring, leading them to miss opportunities in their efforts to maintain their Ionian empire. But what strikes the reader is precisely the opposite conclusion—not that the Athenian *demos* is lacking in needed confidence, but that they are willing to make sacrifices and

¹⁰ See Mynott and Hornblower, ad loc, for the strength of ὅμως δὲ at this moment.

¹¹ *Commentary*, ad loc.

¹² Andrew Wolpert, "Thucydides on the Four Hundred and the Fall of Athens," in *The Oxford Handbook of Thucydides*, ed Ryan Balot, Sara Forsdyke, and Edith Foster (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 181.

temporarily abrogate their rights and privileges in the service of the war effort.¹³ Ultimately, they implement a new constitution, the regime of the Five Thousand, which Thucydides praises as an example of the Athenians “practicing good politics” and “lifting up the city” (VIII.97). We know from other sources that this regime was short-lived, but Thucydides’ narrative ends on a high note of domestic and military success for Athens, almost as if the Athenians have recaptured the heights of success that fueled their desire for war in the first place.

Although we cannot make any definitive claims about how Thucydides intended to finish his account, his emphasis on Athenian resiliency after their setback in Sicily is clearly intended to modify our understanding of that disaster and its significance. The final defeat of Athens is not simply inevitable as a result of their Sicilian defeat, but requires subsequent setbacks both domestically and abroad. Thucydides’ final word on the outcome of the war is actually immediately after his encomium to Pericles at II.65.12, when he writes that the Athenians “did not give in before they fell afoul of private disagreements and were overthrown by themselves” (II.65.12). This does not conform to the final book that we have.¹⁴ The moment at which our text ends does not depict the final defeat of Athens. But the Athenians’ resiliency and capacity to adapt more than any normal city seems to have deeply impressed Thucydides. The moment of relative concord that was the Regime of the Five Thousand may only have postponed the final outcome of the war, but Thucydides finds it remarkable because it defies the normal patterns of human behavior.

¹³ Cf. Ostwald, *From Popular Sovereignty to the Sovereignty of Law*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986), 341.

¹⁴ Contra Wolpert, the final note of domestic politics is positive and a step away from the horrors of *stasis*; it does not actually show “how civil unrest changed Athens and caused the Athenians to lose the Peloponnesian War.” “Thucydides on the Four Hundred and the Fall of Athens,” 180.

In the previous chapters, I critiqued Pericles' emphasis on the power of reason to guarantee long-term success abroad and engineer a perfectly calibrated society at home. But if his language of the regime can be taken as representative of the Athenians, it help to explain the Athenians' ability to reform their regime to meet the needs of the moment. In Pericles' description of the Athenian *politeia*, he asserts:

For we possess a regime (πολιτεία) not modeled on the laws of our neighbors—we are rather a pattern for others than imitators of them. But whereas (μὲν) it is called by the name “democracy,” since it is not run with a view to the few, but to the many; nevertheless (δὲ) with respect to the law in private disputes there is equal standing for all, while with respect to prestige each man wins preferment in public office not so much on the basis of rank (ὑπὸ μέρους) as of virtue. Nor again is poverty a bar—if a man has something good to do for the city he is not stopped by the obscurity of his status (II.37.1).

Pericles' language in this passage is highly ambiguous on the question of who holds power or how to define the regime he is describing. He refers to it as “run with a view to the many” (ἐς πλείονα οἰκεῖν), which is generally taken by scholars to mean managed in the interests of the many; it is ambiguous about the extent of the control exercised by the many. One might say that it is government for the people, if not clearly of or by the people.¹⁵ The ambiguity extends throughout the passage. He qualifies his description of the regime as “called by the name democracy,” without clarifying what it might more accurately be called. In fact, his vocabulary of contrast (μὲν ... δὲ) implies that his following description—including his claim that the few are treated fairly under the law—cuts *against* the label of “democracy.”¹⁶ His reference to the

¹⁵ Martin Ostwald, “Oligarchy and Oligarchs in Ancient Greece,” in *Polis and Politics: Studies in Ancient Greek History*, ed. Pernille Flensted-Jensen, Thomas Heine Nielsen, and Lene Rubinstein (Copenhagen: Museum Tusulanem Press, 2000), 387; *From Popular Sovereignty to the Sovereignty of Law*, 183n29.

¹⁶ See Andrewes, *Historical Commentary on Thucydides* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1981), V.335: “...it would be rash to infer that Thucydides thought the reality greatly different from the name, but the phrase is lukewarm, and that itself is significant. The μὲν-clause is, as often,

meritocratic preferment of virtue over rank is also an ambiguous play on the vocabulary of rotation: “on the basis of rank” (ἀπὸ μέρους) uses the same word as (and is taken by many translators to mean) “by rotation” (ἐν μέρει/κατὰ μέρος). This wordplay would perhaps imply a contrast between merit and the rotating offices of Athenian democracy, but Pericles does not actually say so.¹⁷

Pericles’ description of Athenian democracy has been characterized as “combining the best features of democracy (equality for all) and aristocracy (preference for merit) in a complex structure of antithesis.”¹⁸ This gloss on Pericles’ oration clarifies something that is basically obscure in Pericles’ rhetoric—is he praising democracy or not?¹⁹ An audience member could walk away from the speech with no clear answer to this question.²⁰ In the vast literature trying to clarify Pericles’ obscure statements on Athenian democracy, there has been little acknowledgment of the productive possibilities of his obscurity. Nicole Loraux comes closest, as she argues that the speech is itself an act of revision and denial of the Athenians’ history of social

concessive: the complicated δέ-clause to which it looks forward, whatever else it may assert, defends the system against a standard charge, that under such a regime men of talent do not get enough weight and opportunity. Democracy seems to need defence rather than praise; there is hardly anything in the speech that could be called anti-democratic, but Thucydides does not make Perikles speak like an enthusiast for democratic doctrine.”

¹⁷ Following Mynott (ad loc), J. R. Grant (“Thucydides 2.37.1,” *Phoenix* 25, no. 2 (1971): 104-107), Edward M. Harris (“Pericles’ Praise of Athenian Democracy: Thucydides 2.37.1,” *Harvard Studies in Classical Philology* 94 (1992): 157-67), and Pope (“Thucydides on Democracy”). Contra Hornblower, *Commentary*, and Gomme, *Historical Commentary*, ad loc, but given my point about the ambiguity of the passage I would argue it is important not to stake out a strong interpretation.

¹⁸ Rusten, *Thucydides The Peloponnesian War: Book II*, 143.

¹⁹ James H. Oliver takes a strong line that Pericles is not referring to the Athenian regime at all, on the supposition that ὄνομα must be intended to contrast with ἔργον, and κέκληται must imply a contrast with πεφυκέναι. “Praise of Periclean Athens as a Mixed Constitution,” *Rheinisches Museum für Philologie* 98, no. 1 (1955): 37-40.

²⁰ See James A. Andrews, “Pericles on the Athenian Constitution (Thucydides. 2.37),” 558.

division. Thus, it obscures an underlying reality in favor of “oblivion.”²¹ I disagree that the omissions amount to a denial. The “disturbing silences”²² in Pericles’ account may be in the service of manufacturing unity, but it also allows difference and implicitly acknowledges that different parties to the political order might have different understandings of its virtues and their place in the regime. The decision to leave something unsaid is not the same as denying that there is anything to be said on that topic.

The contention of the following investigation is that Pericles’ ambiguity here reflects a real ambiguity in the Athenian thinking about their government—particularly the principles from which it derived its legitimacy. Further, this ambiguity is productive. It allows the city to adjust course and make the needed changes to its politics and policies to meet the moment, and promotes citizens’ looking to the real good of the city rather than the theoretical virtues of the regime. Andrewes has claimed that Pericles “does not seem to be interested in any theory of the constitution.”²³ A more productive version of this observation might be that he cultivates ambiguity, as clear theoretical commitments can entrap future decision-makers in unanticipated ways.

Syracuse as Contrast: Athenagoras’ Language of the Democratic Regime

Although Pericles is the most famous Thucydidean speaker on the subject of democracy, he is not the only one, nor is he the one to offer a definition or justification for democracy as such. That distinction belongs to the popular leader Athenagoras in Syracuse, who functions in the

²¹ Loraux, *The Invention of Athens*, 317, 330-1.

²² *Ibid.*, 182.

²³ A. Andrewes, “The Mytilene Debate: Thucydides 3.36-49,” 82.

narrative like a Syracusan counterpart to Cleon: boorish, demagogic, and proved wrong by subsequent events.

When the Syracusans receive news of Athens' coming invasion, they hold an Assembly. Hermocrates suggests taking immediate action to head off the invasion. He is opposed by Athenagoras, whom Thucydides describes as "foremost among the *demos* (*prostates tou dēmou*) and at that time most persuasive with the many" (VI.35.2). Athenagoras gives the only definition of the *demos* and its role in democracy that we find in Thucydides:

Some will say that democracy is neither wise (ξύνετον) nor equitable (ἴσον), and that those who have property are most suited to rule best. But I say first that the *demos* is the name of the whole (ξύμπαν), while oligarchy is the name of only a part (μέρος). Secondly, while the rich are the best guardians of property, the intelligent (ξυνετούς) advise the best, and the many (πολλούς) judge best based on what they have heard. And all these have an equal share in democracy, whether acting according to their part (κατὰ μέρη) or all together (ξύμπαντα). [2] An oligarchy, by contrast, shares dangers with the many, but grasps for not only more than their share of the benefits, but they take everything (ξύμπαντα) and keep it. Which state of affairs both the young and the powerful among you are eager for, but incapable of bringing about in a great city (VI.39).

Athenagoras' democratic theory is easy to like. George Grote found it "not unworthy of Aristotle" in its seemingly methodical and fair assignation of different roles for different classes.²⁴ What is interesting about Athenagoras' formulation is that he combines a claim about competency with a claim about fairness. Athenagoras' division of functions according to different classes is generally taken to be an argument that a democracy is a sort of coalition of groups that allows each segment of society to do what it does best, while including all of them in

²⁴ George Grote, *History of Greece* (Boston: Jewett, 1851), VII, 190. Cf. Edmund F. Bloedow, "The Speeches of Hermocrates and Athenagoras at Syracuse in 415 B.C.: Difficulties in Syracuse and in Thucydides," *Historia: Zeitschrift für Alte Geschichte* 45, no. 2 (1996): 152.

the franchise.²⁵ Importantly, the *demos* includes everyone. The problem with the would-be oligarchs is that they are seeking a disproportionately large share of benefits in return for a disproportionately small share of the risk, which is a crime against not only the poor but the city itself.

Athenagoras' way of speaking about class conflict is not anticipated by anything said by Athenian speakers, but it is in keeping with a broader progression in Thucydides' account towards more partisan and ideological language in various cities, particularly with respect to class conflict.²⁶ Athenagoras combines the language of division and unity in a new way in Thucydides: the *demos* represents the entirety of the populace acting as one, while opposition is the result of a faction striving to undo the most fundamental tenets of democratic rule by their entitled pursuit of more than their fair share. The implication is that opponents are an "enemy within." His language of unity is a pretext for excluding those he disagrees with from legitimacy.

By emphasizing that the *demos* is the entirety of the population, Athenagoras makes the classic populist claim that all true citizens—the entirety of the "authentic" population—are constituted by his faction.²⁷ This claim is masked by his inclusion of the rich and the wise in his

²⁵ Alternatively, Andrews has argued that the tripartite division of functions is purely hypothetical, to show what different narrow partisan claims to rule *might* look like if one were to make an argument based on expertise. Thus, Athenagoras should not be understood to endorse a system in which the rich are, in fact, given control over the state's property. Andrews, "Athenagoras, Stasis and Factional Rhetoric (Thucydides 6.36-40)," 8-12. Whether the passage is intended as a hypothetical seems to me immaterial: Athenagoras' point is that the many and the wise do, in fact, have claims to competency that are at least as compelling as the oligarchs' usual claims to rule based on competence as money managers.

²⁶ See Marc Cogan, *The Human Thing*, 65-73. Cf. R. Brock, "The Emergence of Democratic Ideology," 165; B.R.I. Sealey, "The Revolution of 411 BC," in *Essays in Greek Politics* (New York: Maryland, 1967), 127. Edmunds, *Chance and Intelligence*, 56.

²⁷ Jan-Werner Müller identifies a "core claim" of populism to be that it represents the entirety of the true citizens. *What is Populism?*, 17.

description of democracy, but the purpose of this inclusion is to demarcate dissenters as outside the roles that democracy allows them. Because the *demos* includes everyone, and even has the potential for special roles reserved for privileged classes, anyone who dissents from the will of the people is not only a traitor to the city and the people, but also to his own class interests. There are legitimate *oligoi* who can be recognized by playing their proper role as financial managers. Anything beyond this role is not a legitimate action for a member of the *oligoi* to take.

Opposition is thus delegitimated. Athenagoras' theory is ostensibly unifying and inclusive, but it is here weaponized for divisive and exclusive ends. The key part of the speech is when he turns it towards an attack on the "young and the powerful" as somehow taking part in a conspiracy against the *demos*. Much like the simple outward looking imperial vision of Cleon that we discussed in chapter one, Athenagoras' definition of democracy as "the whole" is a populist identity claim in the service of foreclosing debate rather than engaging with the arguments of opponents.²⁸ Demagogues are a threat to healthy debate especially in their most abstract claims about the nature of the regime.²⁹

It is unclear, based on other sources, to what extent Athenagoras' definition of the *demos* as everyone would have been controversial, but it is worth noting that Aristotle, Plato, and Pseudo-Xenophon all identify the *demos* as the poorer class, rather than everyone, so it seems at least somewhat contested. Daniela Cammack, "The Dēmos in Dēmokratia," *The Classical Quarterly* 69, no.1: 43.

²⁸ Bloedow sees Cleon and Athenagoras as "on opposite poles" ideologically, because Cleon criticizes Athenian democracy while Athenagoras defends democracy. But this neglects the shared rhetoric of unity and the anti-deliberative purpose for which it is deployed, which make them thematically similar speakers. "The Speeches of Hermocrates and Athenagoras," 153. Cf. Andrews, who notes that both speakers "deftly exploited fundamental principles of democratic ideology." "Athenagoras, Stasis, and Factional Rhetoric," 12.

²⁹ I think this point stands even if Athenagoras is right to suspect that there are subversive elements at Syracuse—although Nicias' faith in this point is not rewarded, so the text would suggest that these elements were not significant. Alcibiades also invokes Sicilian division (VI.17.2-5), but he is not given enough time to exploit it.

The problem is thus not simply the presence of demagogues, but this kind of abstract invocation of the regime. Rhetoric that focuses on abstract constitutional claims is of limited value in public deliberation. This kind of language appearing in a moment that should be devoted to emergency preparations to repel an invasion shows the reader its evergreen potency, and how even issues of the highest importance, which should prompt exceptional unity, can fail to overcome partisan slogans concerning the nature of the regime.

While Athenagoras does not simply prevent debate from continuing, his language is counter-productive to the point that no decision can be reached in the Assembly. Instead, the generals step in and end the debate altogether on the grounds that the rhetoric is too unhealthy: “Then one of the generals stood up, prevented anyone else from stepping forward, and he himself spoke the following on the present issue: It is not wise either to speak such slanders against each other or for those listening to receive them” (VI.41.1-2). After vaguely promising to do some research and reach out to other cities about the best course of action, the generals dissolve the Assembly altogether. Athenagoras has not carried the day, but his resistance has prevented Hermocrates from gaining a mandate, with the effect of leaving the city woefully unprepared for the coming invasion.³⁰ Athenagoras’ rhetoric is effective enough that Thucydides writes “the people of Syracuse were very much divided among themselves” and “only a small minority believed Hermocrates and feared for the future” (VI.35.1).

³⁰ Although it is unclear whether Hermocrates’ proposals, such as sending the Syracusan fleet to intercept the Athenians’, could have averted the Athenian invasion, it seems clear that Thucydides means the reader to understand that the Syracusans are failing to prepare adequately for an existential threat, so Hermocrates’ urging them to take some sort of action is undoubtedly intended to seem essentially correct. See H.D. Westlake, *Essays on the Greek Historians and Greek History*, 182.

The inclusion of such lengthy speeches, especially as it turns out that neither of them has any impact on Syracusan policy, may strike readers as odd or even pointless. But it is perhaps precisely the pointlessness of the deliberation—its dysfunctionality—that Thucydides is highlighting. This is particularly plausible given Thucydides’ interest in Athenian Assembly speeches, and his depiction of Syracuse as a sort of analogue to Athens, both as a democracy and as a free city resisting imperial expansion, much as Athens had in the Persian Wars.³¹ While the historical Syracuse may have been significantly different from Athens in the structure and practice of its democracy, Thucydides emphasizes only its similarity to Athens.³² He does this both by dwelling on their Assembly-based deliberation, with analogous kinds of speakers, and in his explicit authorial comments on their similar character to the Athenians, to which he attributes much of their success (VII.5, VII.96.5). Much like the Mytilenean Debate and Sicilian Debate at Athens, then, the debate in Syracuse is creatively reconstructed by Thucydides to emphasize salient points about Athenian democracy, in particular to show ways in which democratic deliberation can fail to live up to its promise.³³ The Syracusan problem of abstract constitutional rhetoric, deployed by unscrupulous partisans as a way of sabotaging productive debate, provides a point of continuity with the Athenians during their internal turmoil in Book Eight.³⁴

³¹ On the “close analogue” of the two cities, Connor, *Thucydides*, 172. Cf. Tim Rood, “Thucydides’ Persian Wars,” 152-159.

³² On the historical Syracusan democracy, N.K. Rutter, “Syracusan Democracy: ‘Most Like the Athenian?’” in *Alternatives to Athens: Varieties of Political Organization and Community in Ancient Greece*, ed. Roger Brock and Stephen Hodkinson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000).

³³ See A.H.M. Jones, “The Athenian Democracy and Its Critics,” *The Cambridge Historical Journal* 11, no. 1 (1953): 21, for the notion that Thucydides’ puts in speakers mouths opinions that revealed his own thoughts more than what would realistically have been spoken. Cf. Macleod, “Rhetoric and History,” in *Collected Essays* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1983), 70.

³⁴ Their ability to reform their system, as when they reduce the number of generals to streamline the war effort (VI.72-3) also prefigures the Athenian capacity for reform.

Book Eight: *Stasis* in Athens and Samos

At Athens, the oligarchic government of the Four Hundred takes power through a mix of intimidation and by exploiting the popular commitment to reform in the aftermath of the Sicilian defeat. The oligarchs set the stage by executing a well-organized campaign of assassinations without revealing who they are or how many of them are in on it. Thucydides dwells in vivid detail on the psychological state of the Athenians in this atmosphere of fear and suspicion, which is so strong that no one dares even to confide their grief over murdered friends for fear that their confidantes might also be agents of the murderous conspirators (VIII.66). In this atmosphere of cowed silence, the oligarchs convene the Assembly and make a series of proposals that effectively dismantle the democracy: speakers are now immune from accountability to the Assembly for their proposals; no one should draw pay for holding offices; and power should be handed over to the Four Hundred who will, at their discretion, convene the Five Thousand (VIII.67.2-3). Cowed by intimidation, “the Assembly ratified these measures with no one dissenting, and was then dissolved” (VIII.69.1).

The intimidation tactics of the Four Hundred can lead the reader to dismiss this vote as in no way reflecting popular sentiment. But while the Four Hundred never get around to convening the Five Thousand (nor is there any indication they ever intended to), I take even this compromised vote as evidence that the people are willing to make changes in order to achieve a more restrained and functional government. It is in keeping with their willingness, after hearing of their defeat in Sicily, to institute a board of elders (*probouloi*) to streamline their policy-making (VIII.1.3-4). Limitations on the rule of the *demos* have already been recognized by the *demos* itself to be an acceptable (if temporary) emergency policy. Their willingness to put *polis*

over *politeia*, that is, to put country over party, contrasts with the oligarchs, who, as we explore below, are willing to betray Athens to Sparta in order to preserve their oligarchy. When the oligarchic Four Hundred are eventually removed from power, instead of reinstating full democracy the people vote to implement the regime of the Five Thousand, which is to be constituted of those who can afford their own hoplite armor, and will not pay anyone for public office (VIII.97.2).

The initial stages of the Four Hundred further show the extent to which the oligarchs exploited a popularly acceptable idea that it was necessary to rein in the democracy. The oligarch Peisander persuades the Athenian people of the need for change because they need to recall Alcibiades, who can in turn bring the Persian satrap Tissaphernes over with him. The catch is that Tissaphernes will only trust the Athenians if they “are not democratic in the same manner,” (VIII.53.1) because the democracy is not trustworthy. This proposal is not well received by various speakers, who oppose the recall of Alcibiades on religious grounds and speak in defense of the democracy and the laws. Peisander, in the only direct address in this book, then convinces his listeners and ends the debate by stating, “we need to govern ourselves more moderately (*σωφρονέστερον*) and restrict office more to the few...[and] stop consulting more about our constitution (*περι πολιτείας*) than about our salvation... (VIII.53.3).”³⁵ Their tendency to adjudicate everything through political abstractions and slogans is explicitly highlighted as a problem that stands in the way of prudent decision-making. I take this statement not only as confirmation of my running hypothesis that abstract constitutional language is a democratic

³⁵ The language of moderation has an association Sparta, and, I think, contra De Ste. Croix (cited in Hornblower, *Commentary*, ad loc) that it had clear oligarchic overtones, especially in light of the language of oligarchy that follows.

problem, but that it is particularly a problem for democracies, such that oligarchic reform can plausibly be seen to reduce the prevalence of such language. Even though this is a direct criticism of the audience at hand, it is evidently very effective, as they conclude deliberation and support Peisander's proposal: "The *demos* were at first angry upon hearing about an oligarchy. But when it had been made clear to them by Peisander that there was no other salvation, partly out of fear and partly because they held hopes of changing the government again, they gave in" (VIII.54.1). Thucydides specifies at this point only that the Athenians designate Peisander as an envoy to the Persians to hold negotiations as he saw fit, presumably with a more oligarchic form of government acceptable, if not yet instituted.

The *demos* are willing to set aside democracy itself and to put up with a change that they openly admit to be oligarchical in order to save the city. They recognize that their way of talking and decision-making has been flawed enough to demand a radical solution, and, even though they are deceived about Peisander's intentions, their sacrifice indicates healthy patriotism.³⁶

Throughout the extended coup, the oligarchs are careful to frame their actions as a limited reform. The Assembly vote that puts the Four Hundred into power is striking because even in an atmosphere of intimidation the oligarchs maintain a nominal commitment to the Five Thousand, even though they refrain from defining who exactly will be in it, and whether, once it is constituted, it will then take control or will be dismissed at the will of the Four Hundred. Before they take power, they promulgate the idea that the Five Thousand should be those "who would most benefit [the city] with their property or their bodies" (VIII.65.3) and that pay should

³⁶ Martha Taylor has argued that the Athenians are shown to be "weak, passive, and little attached to their democracy," but it seems to me that the scene emphasizes the seriousness with which they take this decision, and a commendable willingness to make sacrifices. *Thucydides, Pericles, and the Idea of Athens in the Peloponnesian War*, 192.

be reserved for those serving in the war. Thucydides dismisses this language as their “public messaging” and a specious “slogan for the multitude” to disguise the oligarchs’ real intention of ruling the city.³⁷ It stands to reason that the oligarchs would not have used such language of rolling back democracy if it were not to some extent acceptable to the multitude that Thucydides tells us it was aimed at.

While the Four Hundred successfully consolidate power at Athens, they lose control of the fleet stationed at Samos. They send envoys to Samos with a conciliatory message designed to prop of their legitimacy as a new government,

...and they instructed them that the oligarchy was not established to harm the city or its citizens, but for the salvation of the affairs of everyone altogether, and that those doing it were five thousand and not only four hundred; and further, because of wars and foreign engagements, there had never yet been an occasion of such magnitude to call together five thousand for deliberation (βουλευσοντας) (VIII.72.1).³⁸

The envoys fail to reach Samos before events there come to a head because of a clumsy attempt to stage an oligarchic coup from within the Samian government. The attempted coup fails, perhaps because the plotters try to please the Athenian oligarchs by murdering the ostracized Athenian demagogue Hyperbolus, which prompts immediate resistance (VIII.73.3). The conspirators are apprehended and some of them are killed, but most are spared. Here Thucydides takes a moment to stress the relative mildness of democrats, stating that the remaining

³⁷ λόγος τε ἐκ τοῦ φανεροῦ (VIII.65.3); εὐπρεπὲς πρὸς τοὺς πλείους (VIII.66.1).

³⁸ This claim is odd because we have evidence that a quorum of six thousand was needed for events such as ostracism. See Hornblower, *Commentary*, ad loc; Mogens Herman Hansen, *The Athenian Democracy in the Age of Demosthenes* (Norman, University of Oklahoma Press, 1999), 130. But the force of the argument must rest on “deliberation.” The envoys’ point must be that large Assembly meetings are not necessary or practical for deliberation, nor have they historically been used for the finer points of deliberation, but for the kinds of things that suit public decrees, which have not come up recently.

oligarchical conspirators were granted amnesty and “lived together as fellow-citizens of the democracy for the future.” What finally ensures that the fleet breaks from the oligarchic government at home is the return of a messenger that they had sent to Athens, who “exaggerated everything to the greatest degree” with stories of mass floggings and the violation of women and children, and “many other lies as well” (VIII.74.3).³⁹ Upon hearing these exaggerations, the army’s first inclination is to murder the oligarchic conspirators at hand,⁴⁰ but they hold off when certain unnamed people “of the middle” (τῶν διὰ μέσου) restrain them by reminding them of the nearby Peloponnesian fleet.⁴¹

Nonetheless, the sailors at Samos are still fired up and focused on the threat of oligarchy. Their generals make all of the sailors swear the most serious oaths “to live in a democracy and in harmony” (δημοκρατήσεσθαί τε καὶ ὁμονοήσειν), to keep up the war effort against the Peloponnesians, to designate the regime of the Four Hundred “enemies,” and to refuse even to negotiate with them.⁴² The army at Samos, Thucydides notes in an aside, believed that a victory by either the Peloponnesians or by the Regime of the Four Hundred would entail their complete

³⁹ Although, given Thucydides’ own description of the reign of terror (VIII.66), the messenger’s account seems to have some truth to it. It is not clear from the narrative that the sailors would have been any less angry with an entirely accurate assessment of the state of affairs at Athens.

⁴⁰ Some translators take this phrase to indicate that they were ready to sail back to Athens and, in Mynott’s phrasing “smash the prime movers of the oligarchy,” but it seems to me to be localized. They literally want to throw (βάλλειν) either themselves (as Hobbes translates it) or lethal objects (Hornblower, *Commentary*, ad loc) at the local oligarchic conspirators they have just apprehended.

⁴¹ This phrase does not convey “moderation,” although Mynott and others translate it as “moderates” and might better be translated as Hornblower renders it: “those who were neutral.” *Commentary*, ad loc. I prefer the literal translation “those in the middle” to avoid making any judgment about their allegiances.

⁴² Jonathan Price notes the language of enmity as the culmination of a deterioration in post-Periclean Athens into a city characterized by internal war as much as external. *Thucydides and Internal War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 315.

destruction (VIII.75.3). Much as we saw with Athenagoras at Syracuse, the language of social harmony emerges in service of conflict and in opposition to deliberation. For Thucydides, there seems to be a certain equivalency between the government at Athens and the claims of the sailors at Samos: “there was at that time a rivalry (φιλονικίαν) between those, on the one hand, seeking to force a democracy on the city, and those, on the other hand, seeking to force an oligarchy on the encampment” (VIII.76.1).

The sailors at Samos then set themselves up as the legitimate Athenian government. First they “held an Assembly” (ἐποίησαν...ἐκκλησίαν) to select new leadership and depose the generals who had been authorized by the domestic government, in addition to making plans to gather tribute from the colonies. In the process of assuming the mantle of the legitimate democratic government, various unnamed speakers articulate a series of claims about their legitimate standing and the regime’s illegitimacy at home: “And they stood up and gave encouragement among themselves, saying, among other things, that they must not become dispirited because the city had rebelled against them, for the less numerous had rebelled from the more numerous, who were also in all respects better provided” (VIII.76.3).

The fleet has the resources not only to take over the empire from Samos, but to restrict the oligarchs’ use of the sea altogether if they refused to “give back the constitution” (τὴν πολιτείαν ἀποδοῦναι). The city is not “useful for the war effort against the Peloponnesians, because of their inability either to send money or to offer “useful advice” (βούλευμα χρηστόν),

which is the reason why a city has power over an army: but even in this matter those who overthrew the ancestral laws erred, whereas they were saving the laws and would try to make the others do likewise; so they were no worse off among themselves than those [at Athens] with respect to those who might give useful advice (VIII.76.6).

If it came down to it, the camp at Samos had the resources to leave and find new lands and cities elsewhere (VIII.76.7). The scene concludes with Thucydides describing the end of the meeting: “After they had held the assembly (ἐκκλησιάσαντες) about such matters with one another and encouraged themselves, they resumed the war effort just as much as before” (VIII.77). Thucydides’ language seems to confirm the sentiment that what they are doing is indeed a version of holding the Assembly, and their actions have at least a plausible claim to legitimacy.

On what grounds exactly do they claim to be the legitimate government? There seem to be four discrete claims. There is a conservative claim to be maintaining the established legal form of government; there is a material claim that the city is useful for its resources, and lacking such resources has little to offer; there is a numerical claim that they are the majority;⁴³ and there is a deliberative claim that the only reason to follow the orders of the city in the first place is because of the quality of advice, which itself stems from the democratic form of government. The first two claims seem to be fairly generic rather than specifically democratic. The Spartans could just as easily object to the lack of pay or changes in their ancestral laws (and we in fact see the Peloponnesian forces similarly worked up about issues of pay, VIII.78, 83-85). But for the Athenians at Samos the conservative claim is subservient to the deliberative one—the failure of the oligarchs to observe the laws shows that they cannot be trusted to give advice. If we take this deliberative standard to be the primary consideration, the language of “majority” makes more sense: they are not claiming to literally be more numerous than the population back in Athens,

⁴³ Although this language is not as clear as some translations make it out to be—their claim to be the “more numerous” does not have the same ring as Mynott’s “we are the majority,” and does not use the language of *demos* or *plēthos* that one would expect based on this phrasing. See also Goodhart (quoted approvingly in Hornblower, *Commentary*, ad loc) who states “the armament at Samos is now the Demos.” This seems to me to state baldly something that the sailors are not quite willing to say at this point.

but they are more numerous than the current government and therefore more representative of the many, and thus aim for the interests of a greater number of citizens in their deliberations. The rulers at Athens cannot usefully give advice because the army has lost faith that any such advice would serve any interests other than the rulers' own. This is a restrained and minimal understanding of legitimacy. We can expand it slightly to the following proposition: in order to be legitimate, a government must plausibly aim to provide good advice that serves interests beyond those of the rulers. If a government cannot meet this criterion, citizens can rightfully reject it as illegitimate.

What is notably missing at this stage of the narrative is any straightforward claim to be the *demos*, or any straightforward link between such a claim and the right to rule. Based on the above formulation, if a government can plausibly be seen to be deliberating for public goods, it has a claim to legitimacy. It does not have to be the instantiation of the *demos*. The claim that "the city had rebelled from them" is often linked to the rhetoric of earlier Athenian leaders: both Pericles (I.143.5) and Nicias (VII.77.4-7) promote the idea that the city is constituted by its citizens.⁴⁴ Thucydides himself likens the retreating army to a city: "they were like nothing so much as a besieged city on the run" (VII.75.5). At the height of their confidence before the start of the war and then at their lowest point at Sicily, the idea that the city is nothing more than its citizens is emphasized, both by speakers for the internal audience and by Thucydides for the reader.⁴⁵ But the sailors do not say "we are the city." They should be understood as offering a

⁴⁴ See for example Mynott, ad loc, n2.

⁴⁵ It is already hinted at with Themistocles' policy of abandoning Attica for their ships I.74.2, the passage that ushers in Thucydides' account of the transformation of Athens into an empire.

counterpoint to the language of Pericles and Nicias.⁴⁶ In calling Athens the city at this point, they are not making a totalizing claim about their own status—they are merely claiming to be the legitimate government, based upon the above deliberative criterion of legitimacy. Because they can be trusted to give advice for the good of the city, they should be the ones giving orders.

Nonetheless, this language at Samos is likely meant to strike the reader as cause for concern. Even if the claim is substantively more modest than Pericles' and Nicias' reduction of city to citizens, it is a step down the path to violent opposition to the home government. The balanced contrast between undemocratic Athens and democratic Samos has uncomfortable resonances as well. Samos evokes Pericles: his great military achievement is putting down the revolt of Samos and installing a democracy there (I.115-17). It is the first example in Thucydides of regime change as part of foreign policy, and of Athens aligning with democrats abroad. It is also given outside emphasis in the narrative: it dramatically marks the end of Thucydides' account of the Pentekontaetia (earlier than a strictly chronological account would call for).⁴⁷ We also know from Plutarch that Pericles gave a famous funeral oration after this event in which he hubristically claimed his accomplishment was greater than Agamemnon's.⁴⁸ In Thucydides' account, the initial Samos episode sets the stage for Pericles' urging the Athenians to act as if

⁴⁶ See Hornblower, "'This was Decided' (edoxe tauta)," in *The Long March: Xenophon and the March of the Ten Thousand*, ed. Robin Lane Fox (Yale: New Haven, 2004), 253.

⁴⁷ See Hornblower on the Samian narrative being "out of proportion" (*Commentary*, I.115.1) and leaving a "Great Gap" of unexplored events in the 430's, cited in Pelling, "Herodotus and Samos," 7.

⁴⁸ Vincent Azoulay sees the backlash to Pericles' boastfulness after Samos as a possible explanation for the relatively subdued tone of the funeral oration that Thucydides gives us. *Pericles of Athens*, trans. Janet Lloyd (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2014), 34. Pelling postulates that it was at this oration that Pericles articulated his famous line: "quoted twice by Aristotle (Rhet. 1365a31-33, 1411a2-4), that 'it was as if the spring had gone out of the year.'" "Herodotus and Samos," 7.

they were islanders (I.143.5) and abandon all thought of their material attachments in Attica. He wants Athens to be more like the Samos that he subdued to his will— islanders set apart from mainland Greece. If Athens is a paradigm for others, Samos—as a great island democracy—is Pericles’ paradigm for Athens. The fragility of the democracy at Samos, and the narrative emphasis on the sailors’ enmity with the government at Athens, show a dangerous afterlife of Pericles’ words and deeds: The sailors use a modified version of the Periclean idea of the city to justify violence against the government at home, despite their own families being back at Athens (VIII.74.3). In their speeches encouraging each other, they even bring up the scale of Pericles’ campaign against Samos in order to stress the value and strength of the island as the base of their new independent empire (VIII.76.4).

As the crisis between the Athenian government and the fleet at Samos continues, Thucydides depicts the feelings at Samos becoming more heated, as the language of the paraphrased speeches shifts both to more explicitly democratic and more violent terms. The main action they take in their capacity as the legitimate government of Athens is to recall Alcibiades— something only the Assembly could legally do. When Alcibiades arrives at Samos, he uses a series of promises of Persian support and money to get himself elected general. Thucydides makes clear that Alcibiades was promising more than he could deliver, but the sailors’ Assembly is fired up with hopes of “safety and revenge” against the Four Hundred, such that they want to turn their backs on the Peloponnesian fleet and sail against the Piraeus (VIII.82.1). It bears noting that it is only once Alcibiades shows up and seduces the sailors with false promises that they are ready to attack Athens, at which point he restrains them. Under the influence of Alcibiades, they lose sight of the distinction between the city and its regime, as Thucydides goes on to say the people are ready to prioritize attacking “their own people” (ἐπὶ σφᾶς αὐτούς),

leaving their Ionian empire to the Peloponnesians (VIII.86.4). What was before described as a “rivalry” now is on the brink of becoming a civil war.

With Alcibiades there, the Assembly becomes a more dangerous place. The language of politics also shifts. When the envoys representing the Four Hundred arrive, “an Assembly was held in which they tried to speak. However, the sailors did not want to listen at first, but were shouting out to kill those who had overthrown the *demos*” (τοὺς τὸν δῆμον καταλύοντας) (VIII.86.2). After they quiet down, the envoys attempt to convince the Assembly that the change in government is milder than they have been led to believe, that no one was being terrorized, and that the new regime will soon become the Five Thousand, in which the sailors will in fact be allowed to participate by rotation (ἐν τῷ μέρει) (VIII.86.3). The envoys appear to be lying, as the restriction of the franchise to Five Thousand would seem to make sense primarily in order to exclude the sailor class, and we further learn from Thucydides that the Four Hundred are opposed to any version of the Five Thousand, as practically indistinguishable from rule by the *demos* (VIII.92.11). In any case, none of the lies satisfy the sailors. They are “violently angry” (ἐχάλεπαινον)⁴⁹ and begin working themselves up to sail against the Piraeus.

Here Thucydides dramatically inserts his own voice into the text to record Alcibiades’s contribution to the moment:

And at that moment it seems that for the first time—and to no less a degree than any man—Alcibiades benefited the city. For when the Athenians at Samos were carried away to invade their own people (in which case it is most clear that the enemy would immediately have taken Ionia and the Hellespont), Alcibiades stopped them. And at that time no one else would have been capable of restraining the mob (VIII.86.4-5).

⁴⁹ This language recalls Thucydides’ famous description of *stasis* at Corcyra, when he remarks that “people claimed the right to change the received value of words in relation to action” and as such “he who was violently angry was always trustworthy; whoever spoke in opposition was viewed with suspicion.” (καὶ ὁ μὲν χάλειπαινων πιστὸς αἰεὶ, ὁ δ’ ἀντιλέγων αὐτῷ ὑποπτος) (III.82.4-5).

The language of this scene cannot help but bring to mind Pericles at II.65.8, insofar as he is also noted for his ability to “restrain” his audience from their impassioned impulses.⁵⁰ But as we argued in chapter one, this ability had negative consequences for the long-term health of the democracy. The echo of Pericles clearly flags Alcibiades’ exceptional abilities; it also implies an antagonism to the basic tenets of democratic rule. In the immediate context, it is worth emphasizing that the Athenians at Samos only become a “mob” (ὄχλον) once Alcibiades arrives.⁵¹ He may be the only leader present who could restrain them at this moment, but the reader cannot help but wonder how much he has contributed to the tenor of that moment in the first place. Further, it is striking that Thucydides finds Alcibiades’ contributions to Athens to be beneficial *for the first time*.⁵² Given the central role that Alcibiades has played in events for several years, this compliment is somewhat backhanded. The thrust of the praise is not so much that Alcibiades is a necessary kind of leader as that, given enough opportunities, even someone as self-serving as Alcibiades will eventually make a positive contribution to public life. That Athens needs him in this moment speaks to the extreme and unhealthy nature of the moment more than a categorical endorsement of leaders like Alcibiades.

Thucydides’ shift to referring to the sailors as a “mob” coincides not only with the recall of Alcibiades, but with a shift in the language of political legitimacy from *polis* to *demos*. As we

⁵⁰ On this echo, see Hornblower, *Commentary*, ad loc. Rood, *Thucydides: Narrative and Explanation*, 276.

⁵¹ At VIII.72.2 we learn that the oligarchs at Athens already view the sailors as a “mob,” but Thucydides is more circumspect on the point at which they become a mob.

⁵² There is some disagreement because many manuscripts contain πρῶτος (“pre-eminently”) instead of πρῶτον (“for the first time”). I follow the scholarly consensus in favoring πρῶτον for both grammatical and contextual reasons. Andrewes, *Historical Commentary*, ad loc; Hornblower, *Commentary*, ad loc.

saw, the sailors' Assembly urges death against the envoys who have "overthrown the *demos*,"⁵³ and it is only at the point when the word *demos* takes over as the operative political vocabulary that they are fully prepared to invade their own homeland. To drive this point home, Thucydides writes that representatives from Argos arrive immediately after Alcibiades prevents a catastrophe and they pick up on the key language, offering their services to "the Athenian *demos* at Samos" (VIII.86.8).⁵⁴ As the sailors embrace their identity as the *demos*, they view the oligarchic regime at home as enemies to an even greater degree than the Peloponnesians. When the vocabulary features language of the polis, the debates invite at least some acknowledgement of the status of Athens. But if the operative term is the *demos*—if party deserves higher loyalty than country—then a leader of Alcibiades' talent is needed to prevent violence.

This reading of Alcibiades' contribution pushes back on those who hold him up as a model. For example, Steven Forde argues that Alcibiades is an exemplary political figure whose "self-interest...alone is capacious enough to encompass the public good" and that "Athens always needs such a figure, one whose leadership is so strong as practically to usurp the authority of the democracy, in order to function successfully."⁵⁵ To take this view neglects the extent to which Alcibiades has created the conditions for his salvation of Athens. Without his persuading the Spartans' to intervene in Sicily, Thucydides implies that the Athenians would have won. Without his demand to the "most influential" Athenians to do away with democracy and institute an oligarchy (VIII.47.2), the oligarchic coup of the Four Hundred would not have

⁵³ As noted by Mynott (540n2), this phrase could be translated as "destroying the *demos*" which is not the same as destroying the democracy. The thrust of the rhetoric seems to be that the *demos* at Athens has been destroyed, and therefore the *demos* exists only at Samos.

⁵⁴ τῶ ἐν τῇ Σάμῳ τῶν Ἀθηναίων δῆμῳ

⁵⁵ Steven Forde, *The Ambition to Rule: Alcibiades and the Politics of Imperialism in Athens*, 132, 159.

gotten off the ground, and the sailors at Samos would not have felt the need to recall him to rescue the situation. And without the temptations of Persian gold and undiluted victory that Alcibiades offers, the sailors at Samos may not have turned so passionately to attacking Athens. That Alcibiades benefits his city in this moment is not so much proof of the necessity of figures like him, as it is evidence of the extreme distortion of the political thinking of the sailors in a time of crisis, a crisis that only a figure like Alcibiades could have done so much to bring about.

The tensions of this moment are also illustrative of a sociological problem endemic to democracy in the ancient polis. A democracy is defined by the empowerment of the poor because they are the ones who row ships. Naval power and people power go hand in hand.⁵⁶ For a naval empire like Athens, there arises a unique problem: the deployment of the navy draws disproportionately from the poorest class, which is the core constituency of the *demos* (even though there were always some hoplite marines with the fleet).⁵⁷ Conversely, the citizens who remain at home in Athens are disproportionately the hoplite-class and the wealthy.⁵⁸ Alcibiades both is able to inflame his audience and is needed to restrain it perhaps because his audience is disproportionately the poorest segment of Athenian society. Their excitability seems to have its counterpoint in the relative passivity of the citizens who remain in Athens and are cowed into allowing an oligarchic regime to take over. Between the mean of overly active poor and overly passive propertied citizenries, Thucydides implies the importance of a combination of the two. Once again, we can see that the thrust of the composition of Book Eight is to emphasize the

⁵⁶ As noted by Aristotle, *Ath. Pol.*, XXVII, and the Old Oligarch, *Ath. Pol.*, I.2.

⁵⁷ On the *demos* as the poor, Aristotle, *Politics*, 1280a.

⁵⁸ The non-deployed citizens are politically distinct enough from the fleet that Alcibiades' enemies correctly understand that their odds of convicting him in a popular court will change drastically with the departure of the Sicilian Expedition.

collective psychology of groups, rather than the words of individual speakers.⁵⁹ The sailors at Samos begin by questioning the legitimacy of the government at Athens and soon believe that they would be justified in attacking the city and abandoning its empire because they shift from the claim that they are their own city to the claim that they are the only legitimate *demos* of Athens, and that nothing else matters.

Although the sailors come close to sailing against Athens, we should not fail to note that in many ways their politics compares favorably to the reign of terror of the Four Hundred. Jonathan Price notes this particularly well: “The reader is presented with a contrast between a healthy, even ‘normal’ political process taking place in Samos, where opponents are not liquidated or neutralized but merely outvoted, and an unhealthy process in Athens, where a set-appointed faction rules by force and intimidation under a veneer of legality and constitutionality.”⁶⁰ But Price goes too far in arguing that the contrast between Samos and the home government is between rationality and irrationality, as if at Athens there is a complete loss of reason or coherent political thinking. There are virtues of citizenship and patriotic citizens communicating coherently at home as well. It is between the extremes of these two competing regimes that Thucydides locates a healthier politics, as I explore below.

To summarize a key observation of the above argument: the sailors at Samos display an unhealthy mode of thinking and speaking about the regime and gradually come to see the undiluted empowerment of the *demos* as an existential necessity. Thucydides removes speeches here to focus our attention on the state of mind of the sailors and the volatile atmosphere of their

⁵⁹ There are influential individual leaders who address the people, most importantly Thrasyllus and Thrasyboulus (VI.75.2, 76.2, 81.1), but while their actions are influential, their speeches are not recorded.

⁶⁰ Price, *Thucydides and Internal War*, 314.

Assemblies. Alcibiades is needed only because of the increasingly inflamed emotions of the sailors, a circumstance that he has contributed to more than anyone. That he is in some sense Athens' savior speaks not so much to the nature of politics in general as to the unusually distorted politics at Samos, which he has had a hand in shaping. The intervention of the unnamed "men of the middle" should be taken as a contrast with that of Alcibiades, and an example of how great leaders are not necessarily needed to avert great disasters.⁶¹ The lessons of such scenes of distorted politics is not the need for the leadership of tyrannical personalities like Alcibiades, but a form of government that preempts the totalizing rhetoric and catastrophizing thinking that builds like a fever among the sailors at Samos.

Herodotean Echoes, Elite Manipulation

Thucydides' focus on Samos as a site of extreme democracy gains further meaning if we read it in light of its resonances with Herodotus. For Herodotus, Samos represents the failure and limit of all things Greek. As a halfway point, both physically and culturally, between Asia and Greece, Samos is remarkable for its failures. It fails to establish a democracy, it manifests the worst form of tyranny of the many running through the *Histories*, and it falls to the Persians. If in Greek tragedy Thebes functions as the inverted mirror of Athens, as Bernard Knox has noted, Samos seems to fill that role for the Greek historians.⁶² To take one example: while the Athenians draw

⁶¹ Contra Palmer, who reads Alcibiades and the men of the middle as equivalent forces in preventing the worst of *stasis*: "Full *stasis* never came to Athens because at critical moments there were "neutral-minded men," or "older men," and especially Alcibiades, whose words carried sufficient weight to forestall it. I take continual presence of such men to be a great Thucydidean compliment to Athens." Palmer, "Stasis in the War Narrative," 423.

⁶² Pelling, "Herodotus and Samos." Bernard Knox, *Oedipus at Thebes: Sophocles' Tragic Hero and His Time* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998), 7.

on their strengths as free Greeks to defeat the Persians, the people of Samos are offered freedom by their tyrant—the only example of a tyrant who volunteers to step down—but instead of reforming into a functional democracy, their situation devolves into violence. Herodotus concludes that “they had, it seems, no will to be free” (Hdt., III.143.3). Instead of a thriving democratic polis, the domestic turmoil at Samos ends with a Persian conquest that no citizen cares to resist. It is not a city that the historians present as an auspicious place for the survival of freedom, internal or external.

B.R.I. Sealey has separated the governmental change in Athens from the events at Samos, arguing that the “slogan-mongering” in Samos had little to do with the forces at play in Athens, which were, in his reconstruction, promoted by a financial liquidity crisis.⁶³ But the resonances of Samos suggest that Thucydides was both engaging with a theme established by Herodotus and himself artfully constructing his narrative of Athenian democracy with Samos in mind, given the importance that the island played in Pericles’ career. Another striking parallel is the behavior of the Samian fleet in Herodotus, who stop following orders and decide not to continue on the mission to Egypt that their tyrant has sent them on (Hdt., III.45). Just as Herodotus used Samos as the inverted mirror by which to understand the limits of the Greek city, Thucydides artfully emphasizes the events at Samos to help us understand Athenian politics.

Herodotean resonances can also help us pick up on the most troubling aspects of Alcibiades’ rhetoric, particularly his most extended comments on democracy when he is at Sparta. A brief review of the famous “Constitutional Debate” (Hdt., III.80-83) will bring out these resonances. Just as in Thucydides, an abstract discussion of regimes serves to obscure the

⁶³ B.R.I. Sealey, “The Revolution of 411 BC,” 127.

problems at hand rather than elucidate them, and elevates an unscrupulous leader who opposes reform. While scholars often focus on the debate for insights into Greek thinking on democracy, it is generally not put into its narrative context and read as a commentary on the susceptibility of abstract discussions of the regime to manipulation by unscrupulous elites.⁶⁴

In the Constitutional Debate, seven Persian nobles debate the merits of government by the many, the few, or one. The dramatic context of the debate leaves the reader assured that the most conniving and assertive debater—Darius—will win out with his proposal of monarchy, despite the horrendous dysfunctionality of the monarchy thus far; further, it is obvious that he will engineer his own selection as king. The theoretical virtues of monarchy do not explain Darius' rise to kingship; rather, the exploitation of such language illustrates his exceptional ability to manipulate the other Persian nobles.⁶⁵ Abstract discussions of the virtues and legitimacy of the regime facilitate the machinations of the unscrupulous. It also distracts from a discussion of the record of the Persian monarchy thus far: the whole reason that the nobles are having this debate is because the last monarch, Cambyses, went mad and was supplanted and succeeded by an imposter through a palace coup. When Darius defends monarchy because “nothing is manifestly better than the one best man” (Hdt., III.82.2), we should understand that he is

⁶⁴ Kurt Raaflaub argues that the “primary purpose of the debate must have been precisely the discussion of the virtues and vices of democracy” but he acknowledges that the debaters do not engage with each other and it fails as a debate: “...by refusing to confront the opponent’s criticism or praise, the speakers in this debate may well mirror all those self-declared political experts in contemporary Greece who discussed the merits and vices of democracy with more heat than skill.” “Perceptions of Democracy in Fifth-Century Athens,” 44-45. Cf. J. Peter Euben, who reads the debate as a commentary on Athens and Sparta and indicative of a new mode of discourse in the Greek cities. “The Battle of Salamis and the Origins of Political Theory,” 77.

⁶⁵ Contra Norma Thompson, who sees the Debate as primarily illustrating the limitations of Persian thought on the subject of the regime, I see it as illustrating the limitations of abstract discussion of the regime in general. *Herodotus and the Origins of the Political Community*, 72-78.

sidestepping the problem of the quality of real-world monarchs and the pressing question of how another mad tyrant or palace coup could be avoided.⁶⁶ When he declares that democracy inevitably degenerates into tyranny when a “leader of the people” (προστάς τις τοῦ δήμου) undermines it for his own self-aggrandizement (Hdt., III.82.4), we must feel the irony of such an argument serving the reestablishment of a tyrannical monarchy, as well as its resonances for Greek democrats of Herodotus’ time.

The Persian nobleman Otanes’ advocacy of democracy in particular prefigures the abstract language we find in Thucydides.⁶⁷ Otanes begins his speech as an objection to tyranny, but revolves around democratic slogans that are never fleshed out. His speech is a defense of *isonomia*, which, as Gregory Vlastos has commented, is “more of a banner than a label,” or, as Pelling puts it, “more of a slogan than a constitution.”⁶⁸ Otanes finishes his speech with the statement: “I vote therefore that we abolish the monarchy and increase the power of the people. For in the Many lies All” (Hdt., III.80.6).⁶⁹ Otanes has next to nothing of substance to say about democracy, and his unclear sloganeering suggests he knows little about it.⁷⁰ What is clear is that slogans of similar vagueness were likely current at the time that Herodotus was composing his *Histories*, as Thucydides gives Athenagoras a strikingly similar—and similarly futile—pronouncement, “demos is the name of the whole” (VI.39.1). This is not to say that the Persians of Herodotus’ Constitutional Debate are simply analogous to Greeks, but to find a shared

⁶⁶ Christopher Pelling notes the narrative focus on tyranny—both Persian and Greek—that sets the stage for this debate. “Speech and Action: Herodotus’ Debate on the Constitutions,” 132.

⁶⁷ Ibid, 134n9.

⁶⁸ Vlastos, cited in Pelling, “Speech and Action,” 136.

⁶⁹ ἐν γὰρ τῷ πολλῷ ἔνι τὰ πάντα

⁷⁰ Pelling, “Speech and Action,” 138.

concern with the problems of politicians debating constitutional theory—particularly when used by elites.

That Thucydides shares Herodotus' suspicions of an elite constitutional rhetoric of regimes is further hinted at by the speakers who seem most adept at such language. As we saw above, Peisander and the oligarchs manipulate language of constitutional reform in order to seize power. They do this in response to prodding from Alcibiades, who earlier in Book Six made some of the most striking statements about Athenian democracy in the entire work. Alcibiades explains his family's prominence in Athens' democratic politics as a bulwark against the inherent "indiscipline" of democracy, while claiming that they did their best to rule over the "people as a whole" (τοῦ ξύμπαντος) through a "leadership of the multitude" (ἡ προστασία... τοῦ πλήθους). He concludes his speech with the famous statement on democracy: "Concerning such an acknowledged absurdity there is nothing new to be said" (VI.89.5-6). Given how compromised Alcibiades is as a speaker (and the Spartan audience he is addressing after his flight from prosecution), this speech may not tell us much about Thucydides' thoughts on democracy, but it does provide a vivid example of the kind of self-serving and unreliable elite speaker who dismisses a regime altogether. His defense of his "leadership of the multitude" also recalls Darius' warning about democracy's degeneration into tyranny—a sinister resonance given the Athenian fear of Alcibiades' tyrannical aspirations.⁷¹ Writing during a time of increasing democratic and oligarchical extremism, Thucydides and Herodotus share a sense of the dangers of the rhetoric of regime and a suspicion of its most skillful speakers.

⁷¹ Hornblower notes this echo parenthetically, along with a series of other parallels between Thucydides' Alcibiades and Herodotus' Darius: "Very relevant to current Athenian fears about Alcibiades himself." *Commentary*, ad loc.

The Disintegration of the Regime of the Four Hundred

The Four Hundred are a short-lived government. Their rule collapses under the weight of the rivalries between its own members. As the Four Hundred realize that they are losing their grip, they start looking for escape routes. First they try to hand over the city to the Spartans (VIII.90.3, 91.3) and then, when that fails, some of them start maneuvering to cast themselves as popular sympathizers, or champions of the people (προστάτης τοῦ δήμου) (VIII.89.4), in language that again recalls Darius' language in Herodotus and Alcibiades' self-description.⁷² The oligarchs first place party over country and then place their individual ambitions over their party. The oligarchs' political pronouncements are consistently dismissed by Thucydides as disingenuous attempts at manipulation. They are not motivated by a commitment to the virtues of the few over the many, or patriotic desire to preserve the city by bringing an end to an unquestionably destructive war, but simply pursue such policies out of cloaked ambition.

Thucydides remarks that this problem is endemic to “all oligarchies that emerge from a democracy” (VIII.91.3) because the members of an oligarchy “immediately want not to be equals, but each thinks himself to be first by far. Whereas in a democracy it is easier for someone to tolerate the results of an election because he is not diminished compared to his peers” (VIII.89.3-4). The oligarchs' vices stand out as far worse than those of the sailors at Samos. If these two regimes mark the extremes of oligarchy and democracy, then Thucydides, anticipating Aristotle, clearly indicates that an extreme democracy is to be preferred.⁷³ And, once again,

⁷² The language of competition between the oligarchs here recalls Thucydides' summary at 2.65.12-13 of the causes of the loss of the war. See Andrew Wolpert, “Thucydides on the Four Hundred and the Fall of Athens.” Cf. Rood, *Thucydides: Narrative and Explanation*, 134.

⁷³ Aristotle, *Politics* 1289b.

Thucydides encourages the reader to consider the collective psychology of groups in evaluating regimes. Democracy works better because of how it is perceived by citizens more than by any more tangible performance metric, while oligarchy is more vulnerable to a psychology of resentment.

The Four Hundred are deposed when “the majority of the hoplites” in the city join a resistance to the policies of the Four Hundred: “the most important thing was that the mass of hoplites wanted it” (VIII.92.5). This mass of hoplites starts up Assemblies again, passing decrees and taking over the war effort. They do this without engaging in mass violence against the Four Hundred and its supporters; instead, they are surprisingly restrained and are motivated by language concerning “the whole of the political” and achieving some sort of “unity” (ὁμονοίας) (VIII.93.3). Thucydides concludes the episode by remarking that this was “the end of the oligarchy and of the *stasis* at Athens” (VIII.98.4), which indicates that a broad cross-section of Athenian society, including the poorest classes, felt adequately represented by the new arrangement. This is a remarkably strong statement given that *stasis* has been a constant presence increasingly affecting “the affairs of cities” throughout “all of Greece” as the war progresses (III.82.1, 3).⁷⁴ The Athenians’ achievement here defies the normal pattern of human behavior. They are able to do so because the hoplite class of citizens chooses to reject the normal

⁷⁴ Price minimizes the importance of this statement, as he claims that Thucydides “interpreted the internal condition of Athens after Pericles’ death as one of prolonged and ever-deepening *stasis*.” *Thucydides and Internal War*, 321, 328. While in point of fact we know that this was not the end of all civil strife in Athens, we should take seriously Thucydides’ statement that this moment marked a resolution of *stasis*. If we recall that *stasis* denotes not just violence but also hyper-polarization or hyper-partisan politics, we can surmise from Thucydides’ pronouncement that the old divisions were at least temporarily set aside. David Grene captures the importance of the moment as a freely chosen rejection of *stasis*, “the basic disease of the Athenian state.” *Greek Political Theory*, 78.

temptations of *stasis*. The oligarchs behaved precisely as the reader would expect factionalists to behave based on our recollection of Corcyrean *stasis* (III.82.8) when they try to betray the city to the enemy (VIII.91), valuing their faction over their country. By contrast, the hoplites defy this expectation, highlighting the importance of a restraining middle element of society. Just as the citizens “of the middle” are crucial to preventing violence at Samos, so is the middle-class element at Athens.

It is during the rule of the Four Hundred that constitutional ambiguity clearly emerges as a factor in a regime’s stability. Throughout the period of the Four Hundred’s rule, the oligarchs never openly defend the principle of oligarchic rule over and against the idea of a moderate democracy. Instead, they maintain as much ambiguity as they can about what their regime is. The hoplites do not overthrow the Four Hundred in the name of the *demos*, but instead rally around the cry of the Five Thousand. Just in case there is a group of Five Thousand, no one wants to expose himself as excluded from the group: “Indeed, the Four Hundred for this reason did not want the Five Thousand either to exist or clearly not to exist: on the one hand they believed that establishing so many participants would effectively be democracy, while, on the other hand, the lack of clarity (ἀφανεῖς) would make them fear each other” (VIII.92.11). The leaders of the Four Hundred understand the advantages of maintaining constitutional ambiguity, but their government is doomed by disaffected members clarifying its true nature (VIII.89.2).

“Practicing Good Politics”: setting aside the rhetoric of regime

After the regime of the Four Hundred falls, the Athenians implement the Regime of the Five Thousand. Thucydides praises this moment in unusually strong language:⁷⁵

And the Athenians evidently (φαίνονται) practiced good politics (εὖ πολιτεύσαντες) for the first time in my life, at the very least; for it was measured (μετρία), as a commixture (ξύγκρασις) of the few and the many, and this was the first thing that lifted up the city after the bad things that happened (VIII.97.2).⁷⁶

It can be tempting to read Thucydides' praise of the Five Thousand simply as evidence of his anti-democratic sentiment.⁷⁷ To this point, some of Thucydides' praise is no doubt based on his approval of the ending of payments for Assembly service (VIII.97.1), which seems intended to make the regime less accessible than the full democracy of preceding years. But scholars disagree over whether there was any meaningful restriction on attendance at Assemblies, given

⁷⁵ Andrewes declares: "In all his work nothing so clearly reveals Thucydides' own preference as his commendation here of the Five Thousand." *Historical Commentary*, V:338.

⁷⁶ καὶ οὐχ ἥκιστα δὴ τὸν πρῶτον χρόνον ἐπὶ γε ἐμοῦ Ἀθηναῖοι φαίνονται εὖ πολιτεύσαντες: μετρία γὰρ ἢ τε ἐς τοὺς ὀλίγους καὶ τοὺς πολλοὺς ξύγκρασις ἐγένετο καὶ ἐκ πονηρῶν τῶν πραγμάτων γενομένων τοῦτο πρῶτον ἀνήνεγκε τὴν πόλιν.

The translation of this passage is vexed, most notably by the problem of how to take οὐχ ἥκιστα. Most translators have taken it with εὖ πολιτεύσαντες to indicate the Athenians had the "best" government of Thucydides' time (literal translators might prefer "not the least good," but I find this misleading as it loses the usual meaning of the phrase as litotes, almost always conveying a superlative meaning through understatement). However, I follow Hobbes and Mynott in taking οὐχ ἥκιστα not to be modifying εὖ πολιτεύσαντες. Rather, it seems to be strengthening the phrase τὸν πρῶτον χρόνον ἐπὶ γε ἐμοῦ. "At the very least" I think captures both the odd positioning of the phrase set apart from the rest of the sentence, as well as some of the ambiguity as to its meaning. Cf. Hornblower, *Commentary*, ad loc. It may also fairly be translated with φαίνονται, to render the beginning of the sentence: "Not least remarkable..." as Ostwald does, but for my purposes, it only matters to assume that Thucydides genuinely means to praise the politics of this moment as good. *From Popular Sovereignty to the Sovereignty of Law*, 395n199. On the ambiguity of this sentence, see G.M. Kirkwood, "Thucydides' Judgment of the Constitution of the Five Thousand (VIII, 97, 2)," *The American Journal of Philology* 93, no. 1 (1972): 92-103. Cf. Pierre Pontier, "The litotes of Thucydides," in *Thucydides Between History and Literature*, 358-60.

⁷⁷ Jones uses Thucydides' praise of this regime as evidence of anti-democratic bias, "The Athenian Democracy and Its Critics," 1.

the reduced number of citizens at this point in the war, or from precisely which functions the excluded citizens were disenfranchised.⁷⁸ Looking at the numbers of citizens or the mechanics of the government, however, seems to miss the core of Thucydides' praise, as he does not give us the information to make clear judgments on these matters. Thucydides' praise seems intended to focus the reader on the surprisingly restrained tenor and modest but patriotic aspirations of this regime.⁷⁹

More broadly, the willingness of the people to live under a government that does not call itself *demokratia*—and therefore cannot base its legitimacy on the claim to represent the will of the people—evinces an admirable willingness to set aside both factional dominance in practice, and constitutional simplicity in speech. The restriction of office to those with their own hoplite armor and a policy of not paying citizens for serving in office are both paradigmatically anti-democratic policies, if we take Aristotle as a guide, yet the people voluntarily accept these policies after beating back the oligarchic conspirators.⁸⁰ The restriction on Athenian democracy should be understood as a legitimate and popular reform. The people embrace the notion that

⁷⁸ Pericles claims that Athens has 29,000 hoplites to draw from at the outset of the war (II.13). Assuming this number may have been boastful and factoring in subsequent decreases in manpower, it is possible that the Five Thousand was intended to include most of the hoplite class available for Assembly at any given time. See Hornblower, *Commentary*, ad loc, for a review of the scholarly debates. For the argument that the regime of the Five Thousand was in fact and intention the same as the democracy, with nothing more significant than temporary cost-saving measures imposed on it, see B.R.I. Sealey, "The Revolution of 411 BC," 111-132. For the argument that this regime was an intentional restriction of the franchise, see P.J. Rhodes, "The Five Thousand in the Athenian Revolutions of 411 B.C.," *The Journal of Hellenic Studies* 92 (1972): 115-127.

⁷⁹ Contra Pope, "Thucydides and Democracy," 289, it is not clear that Thucydides praises this government because of its "effectiveness in practice," since we don't see much of their policy-making.

⁸⁰ Aristotle, *Politics*, IV.13, VI.2.

their own power should be limited, and that introducing oligarchic principles to government could improve their government.

The “commixture” (*sunkrasis*) between the many and the few describes an inclusive arrangement, but does not make a clear claim about the basis of the inclusion. It is thus crucially different from Athenagoras’ claim that the *demos* is “the whole.” While Athenagoras hypothesizes different roles for the few and the many within a democracy, it is under the principle of democratic absolutism—anything other than the rule of the *demos* is illegitimate. By contrast, the commixture of the Regime of the Five Thousand implies that the rule of the *demos* may be legitimately constrained, and that, by extension, the representation of other interest groups against the *demos* is legitimate. Perhaps more importantly, it exists as part of an effort to “stop consulting” so much about the “constitution” (πολιτείας) (VIII.53.3). The theoretical discussion of the constitution is contrasted with the action of saving the city, and the people are willing to engage in the correct actions as a conscious act of setting aside the rhetoric of the regime in favor of concrete patriotic actions.

In his explanation of the meaning of “doing good politics,” there is a fundamental ambiguity in the phrasing of Thucydides’ judgment about the language of the few and the many.⁸¹ No consensus exists of whether the *sunkrasis* is a blending of the participation of both groups, or a balance of the interests of the few and the many.⁸² *Sunkrasis* conveys a physical “mixing-up” or “blending together” of something, but it is not a word that is attested to in Greek

⁸¹ Andrewes notes pithily that “argument is needed to elucidate every phrase but *Ἀθηναῖοι φαίνονται*.” Quoted in Hornblower, ad loc.

⁸² On the latter point, see Andrewes, *Historical Commentary*, ad loc.

political philosophy—it is more often a technical or medical word.⁸³ Even the use of the word “measured” (*metria*) is subject to multiple interpretations, as it could imply an overall restraint, or a proportionality in the distribution of goods.⁸⁴ It seems to me that resolving these ambiguities cuts against Thucydides’ method of using prose of the deepest obscurity for his most important pronouncements. It seems likely—particularly in the context of the complexities of Book Eight and the unresolved status of the war—that he intended his pronouncements to reflect the complexity of events.⁸⁵ This general point can be distilled further: this government is good precisely because it resists easy description or understanding.⁸⁶ There is no established theory for it, and as such it does not lend itself to the counterproductive sloganeering of the democrats and oligarchs.

⁸³ See Hornblower (*Commentary*, ad loc) on the medical associations of this word. Plato uses the word for physical objects and souls *Statesman* (277c, 278d, 308e), and pleasures *Philebus* (64b-d) but not constitutions, and Aristotle uses the word only to describe physical reaction (*De generatione et corruptione*, 336b).

⁸⁴ In later texts it can be equated with a “middle” way, as in Aristotle’s middle (μέσος) between democracy and oligarchy, but as Pope points out, at this time the word does not imply a middle way so much as a measured, proportionate, or mild approach. Pope, however, goes too far by rendering it “harmonious” and claiming that Thucydides means it to convey that the regime “produced concord.” “Thucydides on Democracy,” 288-9.

⁸⁵ As Rood notes, book 8 conveys the “difficulties of rational calculation in the face of impenetrable complexities. It is because of its acute, and at times anguished, exploration of these complexities that book viii is a fitting continuation of Thucydides’ analysis of the constraints on human action.” *Thucydides: Narrative and Explanation*, 283. Cf. Hornblower, who posits a “deliberate ‘polyinterpretability.’” *Commentary*, ad loc.

⁸⁶ Mitchell makes a similar point: “Thucydides is deliberately ambiguous about, and not interested in, who held sovereignty in the Five Thousand: that question is not addressed. What is important is the fact that while the labels of democracy and oligarchy matter because they are emotionally loaded and can polarise political situations, in the end the gap between them becomes artificial. The same political vocabulary can be put together in a different way to create new meanings.” Lynette Mitchell, “Greek Political Thought in Ancient History,” *Polis* 33 (2016): 68.

This setting aside of the straightforward rule of the *demos* in favor of inclusive cooperation marks an unprecedented moment for Athenian politics. The regime of the Five Thousand is a moment of innovation that brings to mind the innovations of Theseus and Themistocles explored in the previous chapter. It is not bounded by precedent, but comes into being in response to an emergency. It is self-consciously a break from prior forms of government. The Athenians do not return to tyranny or a previous version of Athenian democracy, but instead innovate temporary devices to streamline and moderate the workings of government out of a patriotic willingness to acknowledge that the common good is, in fact, not synonymous with the unobstructed rule of the *demos*. Without framing the reform in the totalizing language of democratic legitimacy, the citizens make a good decision and practice good politics for the first time in Thucydides' lifetime, which is to say they practice a politics that self-consciously sets aside the tempting but counterproductive language concerning the nature of the regime.

“Practicing good politics” cannot mean that it is the first time in Thucydides' life that the Athenians have “enjoyed good government,” as it is translated by Mynott. During times of peace and prosperity and under the leadership of Pericles it would stand to reason that there were at least some moments of good governance. But it seems clear that Thucydides means to comment on the regimes of his time, and it would be fair to read the passage as praising this regime over and against the rule of Pericles.⁸⁷ Based on the above analysis, it seems that this formulation is intended to comment on the behavior of the citizens, particularly insofar as the regime was a

⁸⁷ Mara sees a “pointed critique” of Pericles in Thucydides' praise of the regime of the Five Thousand. *Civic Conversations*, 114. Finley claims that Thucydides must have seen this regime as “second best” after Pericles, a notion that seems to be shared implicitly by many readers of Thucydides, but that is contrary to what the text says. *Thucydides*, 248.

continuation of the behavior that overthrew the Four Hundred. To this point, the active form of the verb *politeusantes* conveys that they are not simply governed well, but are participating well in the city's politics.⁸⁸ Jill Frank and Sara Monoson read Aristotle's praise of this regime as focused on the exemplary leadership of the moderate oligarch Theramenes.⁸⁹ But I think Thucydides' treatment is importantly different precisely because it is not focused on the exceptional leadership of any one leader, but instead leads the reader to focus on the psychology and the virtues of the ordinary citizens.

It would be a mistake to see Thucydides at this moment as coming up with the "mixed regime" that Aristotle famously develops.⁹⁰ Nor is he praising the regime of the Five Thousand for achieving harmony, or "concord," as Maurice Pope holds. The language of harmony (*homonoia*) was available to Thucydides but it is not what he chooses. Instead, the vague terminology of "co-mixture" conveys a sense that the regime was not clearly defined. It was no longer an extreme oligarchy, but also not clearly a democracy. It was measured (*metria*) with respect to the few and the many because it was not clearly in the service of either faction's narrow interests, but instead existed only to save the city. It was a regime that placed patriotism over partisanship.

⁸⁸ To this point, Price notes that the verb "indicates that the Athenians found the formula for good government themselves." *Thucydides and Internal War*, 320n84. By contrast, when Aristotle describes this moment, he prefers a passive construction, writing that "they seem to have been governed finely." Since he sees the regime of the Five Thousand as a fiction masking the temporary rule of Aristocrates and Theramenes, a passive construction makes sense. *Ath. Pol.*, 33.2.

⁸⁹ Frank and Monoson, "Live Excellence in Aristotle's *Constitution of Athens*, in *The Cambridge Companion to Ancient Greek Political Thought*, 254.

⁹⁰ Contra Ostwald, *Popular Sovereignty*, 396.

The word *sunkrasis* also recalls Alcibiades, who urges the young and old to recognize their mutually beneficial relationship as “the most effective blending (ξυγκραθὲν)⁹¹ of inferior, middle, and most rigorous” (VI.18.6). But the recollection of Alcibiades serves to contrast with the author’s own usage of the language. While for Alcibiades the language of blending is in the service of contriving unity for foreign adventures, Thucydides uses it to praise a regime devoted to defensive self-preservation. Alcibiades muddles language of class, age, and expertise to extol a vaguely undefined idea of unity in the service of state action. When the Sicilian Expedition launches and young and old are in fact unified (VI.24.3), the reader understands this unity to be a disaster.⁹² When Thucydides uses the term it is in a moment of internal constitutional reform and compromise between two groups who have been teetering on the brink of all-out civil war: “The Assembly met frequently afterwards, which voted for lawgivers and other things concerning the regime” (ἐς τὴν πολιτείαν)(VIII.97.1). They come together and deliberate peacefully and effectively as a result of their *sunkrasis*. By contrast, Alcibiades used such language to urge rash action over careful deliberation and to try to discredit opposition as inveterately obstructionist. It was, in short, anti-deliberative when used by him, and is describing the resumption of deliberation when used by the author.⁹³

⁹¹ From the verb συγκεράννυμι, closely related to the noun σύγκρασις. Hornblower marks the connection between these passages, citing de Romilly on the political theory of mixed government, “Alcibiade et le mélange entre jeunes et vieux : politique et médecine.” *Wiener Studien* 10 (1976): 93-105. Cf. Macleod, “Rhetoric and History,” in *Collected Essays*, 84-5.

⁹² Conversely, the older men of the city are capable of preventing mass violence when they oppose younger men (VIII.92.8).

⁹³ Romilly takes a more charitable view of Alcibiades, arguing that his language implies an understanding of political community that values the contribution of the poor (*phauloi*) to a greater extent than we find in 4th-century theory. Alcibiades may be drawing on current tropes that place such a value on the *phauloi*, but his overlaying class on age to me seems tellingly obscure. “Alcibiade et le mélange,” 100. As Macleod puts it, Alcibiades rhetoric is “seductive” but it “hardly bears examination.” “Rhetoric and History,” 85, 84.

The deliberative component of the *sunkratic* government seems key. The reason the *demos* was able to put up with a restriction of its authority is likely because of the surprisingly modest criterion of legitimacy that we found among the sailors at Samos, which we recall was that the government must plausibly be seen to deliberate for a good greater than that of the rulers. We can see how the Regime of the Five Thousand could have satisfied this criterion. By lacking any clear theory, but featuring in practice some combination of oligarchs and democrats, the regime can plausibly be seen to give good advice (or deliberate) in a manner that serves the interests of the city rather than of the rulers or a single faction. With this minimal criterion met, all the citizens can tolerate the regime enough such that they cannot rightfully claim that rule by their faction would be a more legitimate government.

If we think back to prior chapters, one can surmise that this regime would not have featured the kinds of rhetoric that Pericles appealed to—rhetoric of unity or grand visions of immortal Athenian empire. It also would not have been victim to the heady but blinkered rationalism that Pericles celebrates and Athenians embrace in moments like the Melian dialogue. Nor is it likely to have dwelled on the dictates of national character in the manner that we saw Alcibiades manipulating during the Sicilian Expedition debate—it is an innovative regime, distinct from the democracy and oligarchy that preceded it. With no basis in abstract or partisan claims, the language of decision-making must be more modest and thereby less prone to the egregious fallacies that we have noted in earlier moments of deliberation.

For Aristotle, there are many different versions of his best practical regime, the *politeia*—a popular government oriented to the good of the whole, a mixture of democracy and oligarchy

or the rule of the middle class.⁹⁴ All of them are characterized by avoiding the excesses of extreme oligarchy or democracy. “The defining mark” of a *politeia* that mixes democracy and oligarchy is that it could be described as either or both, and a well-mixed example can be identified because the constitutive parts do not want to change the constitution.⁹⁵ Aristotle invokes Sparta as an example of this kind of ambiguous government, but we can see that the Regime of the Five Thousand satisfies all of the various definitions to some degree. But for Thucydides, in contrast with Aristotle, there is no such endorsement of the Spartan regime. This is perhaps because stability is not the yardstick by which to measure a good regime for Thucydides.⁹⁶ Rather, the capacity to change—in this case to reform the constitution in the face of emergency threats—marks the most remarkable way of doing politics—and is a distinctively Athenian strength. This capacity for change is facilitated through ambiguous language concerning the regime, and the people’s desire for a government that practices good deliberation. Aristotle was committed to defining a middle type of regime that is neither democracy nor oligarchy, therein emphasizing in his own theory the benefits of the kind of ambiguity that Thucydides links to patriotic restraint and productive collaboration among different citizens and groups. But where Aristotle sees the benefits of theoretical explication of such a regime, Thucydides sees precisely the opposite: the benefits of implementing a regime that has no articulated theoretical basis and thereby does not facilitate the dangerous kinds of sloganeering that so easily disrupt deliberation.

⁹⁴ Aristotle, *Politics*, trans. C.D.C. Reeve (Indianapolis: Hackett, 2017), II.7, IV.8, IV.11.

⁹⁵ Ibid, 1294b15.

⁹⁶ Although this may be the way to assess good politics in some cities, as we see in his praise of the Chians, likening them to the Spartan way of running a “moderate” and “happy” city by avoiding significant involvement in the war (VIII.24.4).

Conclusion:

The final book of Thucydides' account of the Peloponnesian War shows Athens recovering from catastrophe through the resilience of its citizens. Their resilience helps them to weather not only foreign pressure but also the domestic turmoil of an oligarchic coup, which they replace with a regime characterized by restraint and deliberative practices that are acceptable to all factions because they are not captured by any. Drawing on resonances with Herodotus, Thucydides shows a distorted and extreme version of democracy, and illustrates the dangers of the abstract and implicitly partisan language of *demos*, *polis*, and *politeia* in democratic debate. Elite would-be tyrants in particular thrive off of such language and use it for the purpose of manipulation and dissimulation. Conversely, doing good politics involves setting aside such claims and willfully accepting the presence of a multiplicity of interest groups in the formation of policy. When citizens take as their starting point the activity of deliberating with others for a common good, they do better than when they start from abstract definitions of the city or the people. The distinctive Athenian resilience that Thucydides highlights in the final book of his narrative culminates in their establishing a regime with no clear relation to the usual slogans and abstractions of constitutional speech. They are thus able to avoid the fallacy that partisanship takes precedence over patriotism.

Is the Regime of the Five Thousand a democracy or an oligarchy? There is no clear answer to this question. We should infer then, that for the Athenians there was also no clear answer to this question, and that Thucydides means to praise them for supporting a government that did not grant any one faction unambiguous control over the government. From this we can draw two further inferences: firstly, the rhetoric with which decisions were made by this regime

did not feature the kinds of sloganeering about regimes that we saw were dangerous and counter-productive, and without such language public decision-making becomes healthier for everyone. Without a simple slogan as its justification, the language of this regime did not stray into totalizing language for or against policies or groups. Secondly, Thucydides means us to consider healthy politics as a function of the beliefs and behavior of ordinary citizens. Because the Athenians believe that the government is deliberating for the common good and that their faction is at least represented in its considerations, they can accept it and step back from the precipice of violence. As Book Eight draws to a close, it is not in exceptional leaders that Thucydides locates good politics, but the practices of ordinary and unnamed citizens.

Conclusion

Hobbes writes that Thucydides “filleteth his narrations with that choice of matter, and ordereth them with such judgment” that “he maketh his auditor a spectator. For he setteth his reader in the assemblies of the people and in the senate, at their debating; in the streets, at their seditions; and in the field, at their battles.”¹ In reading Thucydides, we occupy the perspective of the decision-makers and then experience the subsequent events generally not going as well as planned. This dissertation has tried to do justice to Thucydides’ purpose by treating his text as an experience of deliberations gone awry.

The fallacious modes of Athenian thought that I have identified are not necessarily the same as those that characterize other democracies in other times. But the challenges faced by Athenian democracy and the context of the 5th century gives the study of their errors continued relevance. In the aftermath of the Persian Wars, Athens was unquestionably the most powerful city in Greece, making for an obvious parallel with the United States after World War II. George Marshall claimed, “I doubt seriously whether a man can think with full wisdom and with deep convictions regarding certain of the basic international issues today who has not at least reviewed in his mind the period of the Peloponnesian War and the fall of Athens.” For Marshall, the benefit of reading Thucydides was that one emerges with “convictions which put fire in the soul” for the cause of “human liberty and individual freedom.”² Thucydides seems to have remembered an Athens characterized by precisely such a fiery set of convictions, which contributed both their exceptional resilience and to their defeat. The patterns of thought that I

¹ Hobbes, “To the Readers,” *The Peloponnesian War*, ed. David Grene, xxii.

² George Marshall, “World Order and Security—Youth’s Responsibilities,” *Department of State Bulletin*, March 2, 1947, 391.

have identified explain why the Athenians were so daring and risk-taking in the conduct of the war, and why they could not foresee the downfall that their risk-taking invited.

The first fallacy, of reducing democratic rule to trust, arises out of their good fortune in having an excellent leader. During the outbreak and initial years of the war, the Athenians place their trust in a man whose personal integrity is evident, and who leverages his prestige to make his proposals almost unopposable. But in so doing they do not behave as a free people. Just as they have changed to become like Persia in seeking to curtail the freedom of other Greek cities, in their domestic politics the Athenian people have changed from being the rulers to the ruled. During the debate at Athens during the outbreak of the war, no opposing voice is included, in contrast with the Spartans, who hold vigorous debates among themselves and with their allies (I.80-88). Pericles is a ruler more than an adviser.

After Pericles is gone, the next prominent leader is the demagogue Cleon, who assumes Pericles' popular base of support and takes on Pericles' language, pointedly echoing his phrases and advocating for a continuation of Pericles' war policy. While Cleon is treated by Thucydides less respectfully than Pericles, the verbal echoes and the substantive policy similarities point to a link between the two. Close inspection of Thucydides' encomium of Pericles (II.65) reveals an emphasis on his superiority to subsequent leaders, but leaves open the possibility of a shared responsibility between Pericles and his successors. It is eloquently silent on Pericles' core claims to instruct and thereby improve his audience. At the very least, it seems that Pericles created the conditions that subsequently allowed demagoguery to flourish. After Pericles' death, when the people treat the Assembly as a space for laughter and choose between speakers who seem disinclined to be forthright with them, it seems that after years of Pericles' imperiousness they may have been ill-prepared for self-rule, and that Thucydides' presumed antipathy to the *demos*

must be understood as an antipathy to the characteristics of the *demos* after it has been shaped by Pericles' methods. They are not simply an emotional or irrational mob, but a decision-making body responding in understandable ways to their experiences of leadership and deliberation.

Pericles' advice to the Athenians to be confident in their planning and in their resources, and to stay the course in their war, shows us the second fallacy running through Athenian deliberation: that reason can overcome any obstacle. This fallacy arises from a narrow and materialist framework, combined with a strong sense of the Athenians' exceptional intelligence. While Pericles is often linked to a circle of sophists and pre-Socratics, his confident faith in the Athenians' collective powers of calculation and judgment does not have a clear predecessor. The fragments we have from 5th-century figures such as Democritus emphasize the importance of individual autonomy and the virtue of self-generated restraint.³ Pericles, by contrast, indicates that Athenian intelligence is essentially limitless, able to account for factors such as chance and spread their empire over the entire world. We should understand the Athenian decision to double the size of the fleet for the Sicilian Expedition as motivated by an inflated sense of their ability to guarantee success by accounting for all possible contingencies. This fallacious way of assessing risk seems to derive from an inflated sense of their own intelligence and a Periclean optimism that predicting victory is as simple as measuring resources.⁴

The belief that reason conquers all leads to problems of communication, as it stymies the Athenians ability to speak to other Greeks persuasively. From the very beginning of the work,

³ Edward Hussey, "Thucydidean History and Democritean Theory."

⁴ As I write this, the Russian army is demonstrating precisely the limitations of their planning and superior resources in Ukraine. No one was more surprised than the experts.

<https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2022/03/russia-ukraine-invasion-military-predictions/629418/>

the Athenians' belief in their rationality makes the Athenian envoys speak in the wrong language for the moment. They fail to assuage Spartan concerns because they dwell on their own power, which is precisely what worries the Spartans. Their rhetoric against the Melians makes a clearer connection between their thinking and their inability to persuade—because they see themselves as the arbiters of what is and is not rational, and because they cannot understand why anyone would have a different understanding from their own, they cannot persuade the Melians to surrender. The Athenians' hubristic faith in their rationality—and in the universal logic of their rule—makes them incapable of speaking to other Greek cities in persuasive language.

The third fallacy—of treating one's character as destiny—appears in the Athenians' deliberations before both the start of the war and the Sicilian Expedition. Pericles effectively appeals to the Athenian understanding of themselves as a naval people to make the case for his war strategy. During the Sicilian debate, Alcibiades plays on the Athenian self-understanding of their characteristically active and daring temperament, and invokes their past successes as justification for a new risk. Nicias fails to counter Alcibiades with any compelling appeals to Athenian history or culture, and fails to capture the Athenians' imagination in service of another course of action. Nicias' inadequate rhetoric suggests that a more thoughtful orator could have diverted Athenian energies to safer enterprises, and that his failure is of his own making.

Thucydides points here to a reality of human thinking: people make decisions based on their understanding of their collective past, present, and future—a process that I call narrative reasoning. Spartans, Athenians, and Syracusans all make decisions that are inflected by their collective narratives. The great irony of the Athenians' attraction to Alcibiades' rhetoric of nostalgia is that Athens' past successes were not built on nostalgia, but on innovation and change. Themistocles is the Athenian leader most highly praised by Thucydides because he is an

innovator who changes the trajectory of the Athenian story. By seeking to follow their historical paradigm, they are paradoxically betraying the most basic Athenian characteristic of innovation.

For Thucydides, character is essential to explaining the behavior of nations. This factor is rarely discussed in contemporary analyses of the causes of war, because it can seem reductive and deterministic. But Thucydides' analysis of character reveals it as a motivating set of beliefs that are changeable, not a static set of irrational biases. When people come together and make a collective decision, they choose a particular narrative for themselves. The task of good rhetoric is to prompt people to recognize that their next chapter may be different from what came before. Major decisions are moments when people can choose to summon their better angels.

The final fallacy in my analysis of Athenian deliberation is that idea that partisanship is patriotism, a belief that subordinates the good of the *polis* to a rigid conception of the *politeia*, and infects public decision-making with facile partisan sloganeering. This fallacy becomes apparent only in the final book of the history. After the disastrous defeat in Sicily, we see the Athenian *demos* at both their lowest and their most admirable. First, they fall prey to class conflict as the oligarchs seize control through a reign of terror and the army stationed at Samos declares itself the legitimate government. We know from Herodotus that theoretical divisions of regimes into rule of the one, the few, and the many, were current at the time. But in Herodotus' account, just as in Thucydides, such language does not serve rigorous decision-making, so much as the empowerment of skilled but unscrupulous speakers. The Athenians are able to overcome this kind of fallacious thinking when they set aside their divisions and established political slogans and form a compromise government of the Five Thousand—a government that lacked a theory and did not fit any established type of regime.

The Athenians are able to step back from the brink of civil war because of the actions of moderate citizens who do not have a strong commitment to either faction, because of a tradition of constitutional ambiguity dating back at least to the time of Pericles, and because of the people's modest expectations of government. They adapt the ambiguous principles of their government to come up with something altogether new. Here the Athenians for the first time in Thucydides' life, as he sees it, finally "practiced good politics"(VIII.97.2). For Thucydides, good politics combines a capacity to change with restrained aspirations for government.

The Athenian people in the final book of Thucydides' history are admirable not only for their ability to reform and set aside destructive rhetoric of the regime, but for their resilience in the war effort. They are willing and able to keep fighting after a disaster that would have subdued most cities. Thucydides' admiration is centered on the Athenian people, not on any individual leaders. In this final book of the history, the speeches fall away in favor of images of the collective psychology of groups or the behind-the-scenes machinations of individual oligarchs. It is not the quality of speakers or advisers, but the quality of the common citizens, that shapes events and produces the most noteworthy outcomes.

The people's public-spirited resilience seems to derive from their democratic traditions. When Thucydides writes that "it was a difficult thing to put an end to the freedom of the Athenian people, nearly one hundred years after the tyrants had been overthrown" (VIII.68.4), he points the reader to the idea that democratic politics may have a long-term benefit to the civic-mindedness of the citizens. While the Athenians exhibit the challenges of Assembly-based decision-making, their virtues in Book Eight indicate that their political engagement has prepared them to make sacrifices and "practice good politics" in the absence of a leader as powerful as Pericles. To read Thucydides as an enemy of democracy is to lose sight of the

evident admiration he has for the Athenian citizens' strength born of their democratic way of life. While the errors of thought into which they fall could afflict any regime, the benefits of free participation in politics—the shared formation of a collective story, the willingness to change, and the ability to reconsider public decisions in the face of setbacks—are distinctive to a democracy.

Thucydides among the Greeks

As noted at the conclusion of chapter three, Thucydides' critique of Pericles is anti-utopian, in some ways similar to Plato's illustration of the gap between real and ideal in the *Republic*. Both Thucydides and Plato recognize the limitations of political life, but whereas Plato's response to this insight is to point to higher forms of knowledge outside of politics, Thucydides looks to the kinds of knowledge born of experience of practical events. The Thucydidean perspective, much like Plato's, offers no evidence of the possibility of permanent solutions to the enduring problems of hubris and misunderstanding that will always afflict human beings. But an awareness of such problems can mitigate the worst outcomes.

While Thucydides is often read as a precursor to Hobbes, and is generally taken to share Hobbes' bleak view of human nature as a collection of irrational drives, Thucydides' vision of human nature seems to be of creatures who are dangerous precisely because of their rational pursuit of self-interest. There is no sharp dichotomy between the rational and the irrational in Thucydides, and no simple blaming of the appetites of the mob for poor democratic decision-making (as one might expect from Plato). There is always a rationale for the decisions that are made, even if it is a flawed rationale. The Athenians are not blinded by passion or ineluctably carried to disaster by forces beyond their comprehension; rather, they are guided by their self-

understanding and their understanding of others, both of which are flawed and are exacerbated by inadequate leadership.

Whereas Hobbes suggests that with proper understanding of the bases of human action we can make permanent progress towards peace and stability, Thucydides shows how such scientific optimism about progress is misguided and potentially counter-productive. Humility in the face of the unknown is a more rational and less destructive posture than the hubristic confidence that any contingency can be accounted for and success guaranteed. Thucydides thus combines a scientific perspective with a tragic sensibility. He comments on the unfounded optimism of the Greek Enlightenment, and suggests that this optimism exacerbates fallacious thinking and consequent disasters.

The Athenians seek simple answers, based on universal claims, to explain their success and their right to rule. But Thucydides is deeply concerned with questions of responsibility for war, and the complexity of assigning responsibility for an outcome to any single actor or moment. He does not allow the reader to conclude that guilt can be unambiguously assigned to one leader, or to look at any one turning point or material factor as a singular explanation. The Athenians look to exonerate themselves from responsibility for their actions, but Thucydides shows their reasoning to be self-defeating in the overconfidence it breeds and the hostility it engenders in others. The narrative makes clear that speaking and thinking of oneself in the terms that the Athenians prefer—as liberated from or superior to the normal constraints upon other cities—is counter-productive to sound decision-making.

The fallacies that I identified in their rhetoric of reason and of collective character overlap—the Athenians believe in the power of human judgment, and look to their accomplishments as the paradigm. Both their appeals to their own accomplishments and their

most universal or objective justifications merely serve their claim to inherent superiority. This is the danger of the rhetoric of rationality, Thucydides indicates. No one ever invokes the power of reason without the accompanying belief that they are the more rational actor. The rhetoric of reason justifies the most hubristic and unreasonable inclinations.

The Athenians make clear to other Greeks that they believe they deserve to rule. They believe they earned their status by defeating the Persians and it is only reasonable that they now expand their empire: Their status reflects their worth. This reasoning, they think, is comprehensible to everyone, or at least would be comprehensible if they were being honest with themselves. The Athenians thus appeal to an alternative reality in which everyone agrees that the Athenians are justified and rational. Their attachment to this alternative reality is what leads them to such terribly ineffective rhetoric abroad and at home.

If they could have started their process of public reasoning by meeting the other Greeks where they are, rather than where they wish they were, then they might have been able to understand their own distinctive limitations. Meeting them where they are requires acknowledging that other motivations and ways of reasoning are legitimate and not to be dismissed as irrational. Exceptional leaders like Pericles should not dismiss other Greeks or the people at home as irrational, and less exceptional leaders like Nicias should not dismiss the rhetoric of collective character as beneath their rational perspective.

Respect for the different motivations of others is helpful both for understanding how they will act, and for understanding one's own thinking. Here an awareness of the fallacy of character as destiny can help. Sound reasoning should emphasize that an enemy has a say in war, and that precedent is an imperfect guide to what will happen. This has a positive potential as well—we should not be bound by what has come before and should be open to new kinds of successes.

Resisting the rhetoric of flattery requires speaking to the peoples' human desire to participate in a collective story with a positive future.

Thucydides thus provides resources for thinking about productive rhetoric and the role of leaders in a democracy, even as he indicates that leaders must work within a complex web of meanings that they cannot fully control. This is not to take him as a defeatist on the possibility of good decision-making in a democracy, but to highlight how particular fallacies reflect and amplify errors that could have been avoided. Much like Herodotus, Thucydides is often taken for a fatalist on the subject of human agency, but both historians show scenes of deliberation where advisers make a difference, and better advisers are strongly distinguished from worse.⁵ The fifth-century historians were not interested in theorizing the inherent merits or deficiencies of democracy, but exploring the complex interplay between individual advisers and their attempts to sway unruly rulers, be they a king or a *demos*. There is no reason to believe that the fallacies into which the Athenian people fall would not afflict an autocrat or an oligarchy.

This understanding of Thucydides is more productive for democratic politics than the conclusions of recent readings such as Hawthorn's. Hawthorn is sensitive to the "pre-rational" commitments underlying action, but concludes that Thucydides may have intended his readers to conclude that there is no definitive conclusion to be drawn: "Twenty-one years of fear, hope, fury, frustration and suffering...may have seemed to him to signify nothing beyond themselves. If there is a lesson to be learnt, this might be it."⁶ This is altogether too defeatist a take on a work intended by Thucydides as a possession for all time. If the narrative were simply an account of

⁵ Pelling, "Speech and Narrative in the *Histories*." Landauer, *Dangerous Counsel*, chaps. 3 and 4. Lunbeck and Stone, "The Wise Adviser Trap."

⁶ Hawthorn, *Thucydides on Politics*, 232, 16.

unpredictable chaos, showing the futility of planning, such a reading would be correct. But Thucydides shows how decision-making can avoid or succumb to certain fallacies—neither perfectly rational nor driven by insuperable passions. If we can identify potential fallacies at the outset, we can take encouragement from noting that the course of events could have gone differently if the decision-makers had avoided them.

Thucydides likely wrote in the immediate context of a limited readership of elites who blamed Athens' defeat on its democratic form of government, and enjoyed theorizing about the democracy's faults.⁷ The development of philosophical thinking about the nature of the regime and the virtues of different forms of government after the end of the Peloponnesian War hardly seems coincidental. Thucydides seems intent on defying any expectations that he join his contemporaries in such an analysis, as he neither defends nor attacks any form of government as such. Connor takes this to be an act of liberating the reader from “cliché,” and refusing to give us “the last word in the assessment of politics.”⁸ While it is true that Thucydides' text remains remarkably open-ended and subject to reinterpretation, the abstention from theoretical explanation seems to me to be in the service of a particular effect on the reader beyond liberation from definitive interpretation. The abstention is a conscious decision—Thucydides rejects the theoretical debates of his time (and the violent partisan inclinations that it justified) in favor of a new kind of experiential text that strips away details to focus on the largest themes, while at the same time capturing the feelings of particular moments. Only by experiencing the moments of decision-making in a way that captures their distinctive traits, while also making sense of the actors' motivations in universal terms, can we observe how things actually play out and learn

⁷ Kurt Raaflaub, “Perceptions of Democracy in Fifth-Century Athens.”

⁸ Connor, *Thucydides*, 242.

how to avoid similarly disastrous decisions. To reduce Thucydides' text to a clear position on democracy or oligarchy is to fall into the same abstract way of thinking that Thucydides finds so counter-productive to public decision-making.

In the aftermath of the Athenian empire's defeat, it was easy to blame the democracy. Thucydides, by contrast, shows how closely their accomplishments are tied to their democratic way of life and their distinctive character. Although the Athenians grow overconfident and too attached to their past achievements and national character, their story resonates for the reader because the same attributes that made for their success account for their downfall. It is a story of a particularly daring character dramatically enacting a fall through hubris; but at the same time an understandable series of avoidable mistakes made through flawed but comprehensible assumptions.

Bernard Williams found in Thucydides a humbler and more realistic way of thinking than in Plato or the subsequent philosophers. Those philosophers, in Williams' account, promise "a pattern that makes sense of human life and human aspirations," while Thucydides leaves us "with no such sense."⁹ Thucydides' dislike of much of the political rhetoric of his day seems to be a reaction to the grand but simple patterns of thought that such rhetoric encouraged. Imperial success encouraged both the universalizing rhetoric of objective reason and a myopia of Athenian exceptionalism. Thucydides' highest praise of Athenian political life occurs not during Pericles' reign, when they were at their imperial acme, but at the moment when they govern themselves under the compromise regime of the Five Thousand, thereby setting aside any clear pattern of constitutional thought or higher claims about the regime. As a government instituted

⁹ Bernard Williams, *Shame and Necessity*, 163.

only to prevent disaster, at home and abroad, it can be understood as a precursor to the modern liberal idea that it is better for political life to be organized around preventing a *summum malum* than achieving a *summum bonum*.¹⁰

Through the many and profound errors that Thucydides' describes, we can conclude that sound decision-making in a democracy (or any other regime) is difficult, but not impossible. Citizens must engage in responsible public discourse and be open to change; and leaders must be evaluated not only for their knowledge and integrity, but the degree to which they contribute to a civil politics of deliberation. With such citizens and leaders, the most egregious errors can be avoided. Thucydides was not a tragic pessimist showing that we cannot escape our fates, but a keen observer of how the freely made decisions create the conditions for success or defeat. The Athenians' fallacious patterns of thought and speech reveal the particular ways in which they set themselves on the path to disaster. Herein lies Thucydides' optimism. If the Athenians had avoided these fallacies, they could have made better decisions. The same tempered optimism should guide modern readers of Thucydides. Permanent peace is not achievable; war is too deeply rooted in human nature. But the time, place, and manner of our wars matter a great deal. By understanding the fallacies that entrapped the Athenians, we can hope to avoid them.

¹⁰ Judith N. Shklar, "The Liberalism of Fear," in *Liberalism and the Moral Life*, ed. Nancy L. Rosenblum (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1989).

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